

# HOW TOASTMASTERS CAN HELP THE PREACHER

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Dr. Chuck Allers

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by

Shawn Nelson

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## HOW TOASTMASTERS CAN HELP THE PREACHER

### **My Story of Learning How to Preach**

I still remember how I felt seventeen years ago when I told my friends and family that I felt called to plant a church. I knew there would be a host of new responsibilities—and one of them would be preaching. I wasn't entirely gripped with fear—it was more of an anxiety. I had taught weekly Bible studies, classes on theology and the cults, and other training classes. But preaching seemed different—and I was quickly heading into uncharted territory. I was overwhelmed with the thought that a congregation's spiritual vitality was dependent in some way on my preaching abilities. As I thought about the people of this future church plant, I wished there was some way I could practice preaching skills beforehand. I knew the people who would be attending each week deserved more than me just trying to “wing it.” But where could I turn for help?

One day, I heard about Toastmasters from a friend. He described it as a group of ordinary people who get together each week to practice public speaking skills. I cautiously decided to give it a shot. Was there anything at Toastmasters—a secular club—that could help me improve as a *preacher*? It turns out, there was! I stayed and immediately got involved in the months before our move. After our move to Temecula, I found a new club and continued being involved after launching the church. I eventually received the Competent Toastmasters Award, Advanced Toastmasters Bronze Award (ATM-B) and even served as my local club president for a while.

Looking back, I can say that Toastmasters was a great help. As I now take my second formal homiletics class (one in college, this one in seminary), I'm reminded about many of the principles I learned nearly twenty years ago when I came to Toastmasters to see if there was anything that could help me become a better preacher. In the first half of the paper, I give these

helpful principles which apply to all public speaking, including preaching. In the second part, I explain how preaching is different from public speaking.

### **About Toastmasters**

Toastmasters is an organization that helps people become more effective public speakers and leaders.<sup>1</sup> Toastmasters has 345,000 participants in 15,900 clubs and in 142 countries.<sup>2</sup> The big idea in Toastmasters is that members learn *by doing*. Clubs can be found throughout cities in the United States and visitors are welcome to attend. There is a small fee for becoming a member, but visitors are welcome to attend club meetings for free. New visitors will quickly notice that the clubs are well organized and follow the same pattern each week. A typical meeting has both assigned and impromptu speeches. The Toastmaster conducts the meeting for that day and keeps things running smoothly. For the impromptu portion of the meeting, the Table Topics Master selects people at random to give a short 2-3-minute speech on a topic they are given on the spot. All speeches, including the impromptu ones, are timed by a Timer. The Timer usually has a visual aid to help speakers keep track of time (both clubs I was involved in had a board with a green, yellow and red light like a street light: green meant, “you *can* stop now,” yellow meant, “you *should* stop now,” and red meant, “stop now already!”). A Grammarian sits quietly to the side counting the use of “ahs,” “ums” and use of language in general. Besides the impromptu speeches there are up to three assigned speeches (commitments for these are made the previous week). These speeches are usually 5-7 minutes in length. Each prepared speech gets an Evaluator. At the end of the meeting, the evaluators give their review of the speeches in front of the group (which acts like a speech in itself). The Timer, Grammarian and General Evaluator are called upon to give their reports in front of the group. Awards are given for Best Speaker, Best Table Topics and Best Evaluator (these awards are little cloth

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<sup>1</sup> “Toastmasters International Fact Sheet,” Toastmasters International, accessed July 27, 2018, <https://www.toastmasters.org/~media/47952D07B0FB4596B2D24228551049FF.ashx>.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

ribbons and they actually do make you feel good). All this usually takes place in an hour and fifteen minutes!

### **Two Keys to Toastmasters**

There are two keys to better public speaking at Toastmasters. The first is *by actually getting up and speaking* in front of other people. In other words, members learn by doing. All public speakers (pastors included) agree that this is by far the best way to improve as a speaker.<sup>3</sup> Better public speaking simply cannot be taught by reading a book alone—it *must* be practiced. Therefore, learning in Toastmasters is hands-on: “members learn by studying the manuals, *practicing*, and helping one another.”<sup>4</sup>

The second key is the speaking manuals. These workbooks guide members through the principles of successful communication. The first manual, often referred to as “the Basic Manual,” has ten speeches designed to develop speaking skills one step at a time.<sup>5</sup> Each speech in this Basic Manual builds off what was learned in a previous speech.<sup>6</sup> It has ten speeches: (1) The Ice Breaker (getting over nerves); (2) Speak with Sincerity (authenticity); (3) Organize Your Speech (using evidence and good arguments); (4) Show What You Mean (gestures, eye contact, non-verbal); (5) Vocal Variety (pitch, inflection); (6) Work With Words (word choice, sentence structure); (7) Apply Your Skills (putting all skills together); (8) Add Impact to Your Speech (using visuals); (9) Persuade with Power (persuasion); and (10) Inspire Your Audience. The first

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<sup>3</sup> Statements like this are easy to find in homiletics books. One good example is from John Stott. Speaking about delivery and gestures, he says “...these matters are best learned by being ‘apprenticed’ to an experienced preacher, by trial and error, and by friendly critics.” John R W. Stott, *Between Two Worlds: The Challenge of Preaching Today* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2017), Kindle loc. 108-109.

<sup>4</sup> Toastmasters International, *Communication and Leadership Program* (Mission Viejo, CA: Toastmasters International, 1999), 6.

<sup>5</sup> The title of this manual was *Communication and Leadership Program* when I was attending many years ago. It has since been updated and renamed to *Competent Communication*.

<sup>6</sup> Toastmasters, *Communication and Leadership Program*, 6.

nine speeches are 5-7 minutes and the tenth is 8-10 minutes. Next, each of these speeches will be explained.

### **Getting Over Nerves – Speech 1: The Ice Breaker**

The greatest fear people have is speaking in front of a group.<sup>7</sup> It is called *glossophobia* (the fear of public speaking).<sup>8</sup> Three out of four Americans (75%) have it in some form; 30-40% have it so badly that they avoid public speaking altogether.<sup>9</sup> This is why the first speech in Toastmasters is called “The Ice Breaker.” The purpose of this speech is simply to get people up talking in front of other people behind the lectern. It turns out that just getting up and talking in front of others helps people overcome their fear.

The Basic Manual has some helpful tips on reducing nervousness. First, the speaker should talk about something that is most familiar to them: a life event or something related to their hobbies or occupation. The reason for this is because we tend to feel more comfortable speaking about topics that are most familiar to us. It also helps to pick a topic where we have strong feelings. “When you speak on a subject that interests you—and about which you have strong feelings—you will become so involved with speaking, you will forget your nervousness.”<sup>10</sup> One good tip is to memorize the opening and closing sentences. Every speaker is familiar with the moments just before the speech—when the nerves kick in. By memorizing the opening line, the speaker simply needs to remember the opening sentence, and that hopefully will set the speech off on the right foot. The closing sentence can act as a target to where the speech will go. Another helpful tip from the manual is that nerves are natural—even the most

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<sup>7</sup> Gerald R. McDermott, “5 Ways to Battle Anxiety in the Pulpit,” The Gospel Coalition, July 28, 2017, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/5-ways-to-battle-anxiety-in-pulpit/>.

<sup>8</sup> “Glossophobia: What It Is and How to Treat It,” Healthline, November 23, 2016, <https://www.healthline.com/health/glossophobia>.

<sup>9</sup> Abdur Rahman Aleemi, Yamna Hasan, and Kausar Perveen, “Glossophobia: The Fear of Public Speaking in Female and Male Students of University of Karachi,” *Pakistan Journal of Gender Studies* 16, no. 18 (2018): 57-70, 60.

<sup>10</sup> Toastmasters, *Communication and Leadership Program*, 14.

experienced and best speakers have nervous energy. The trick is to put it to good use. Positive nervous energy can be used to add excitement. “You don’t want to be totally calm, thus putting your audience to sleep”!<sup>11</sup> So nerves are natural and can be put to good use.

### **Authenticity - Speech 2: Speak with Sincerity**

Once the new member has finished their first speech, it is time to begin developing important skills. The second speech emphasizes the need for sincerity and conviction. Any public speaker, especially a preacher, must first be moved by the message if they expect their listeners to be moved too. The audience will begin to pay attention and consider what is being said when they can tell the topic is important to the speaker. Like the first speech, it’s important to pick a topic that the speaker cares about. People will naturally demonstrate passion when talking about things they care about. If it is difficult to get enthusiastic about a topic, then it is probably best to speak about something else. After selecting the topic, the speaker should create an outline and rehearse the points of the speech. The best advice is to memorize the main points because people who keep looking down at notes appear less sincere than those who keep eye contact. If it is not possible to memorize the main points of the outline (especially because of nerves) then putting the main points on a single 3x5 card is recommended. However, it is very important to only have *the main points* written down, not all the points! If all points are present, the speaker will end up reading them. “Never let your notes come between you and contact with your audience.”<sup>12</sup> When time comes to deliver the speech, the speaker is encouraged to “put the force of conviction into everything you say, revealing your true beliefs.”<sup>13</sup> At the same time, they should “be natural.”<sup>14</sup> Clearly there is much here that applies to good preaching as well.

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 14.

### Using Evidence and Good Arguments – Speech 3: Organize Your Speech

Haddon Robinson said every sermon should have one key point or “big idea.”<sup>15</sup> Toastmasters agrees. For speech three, the workbook says to pick one key point and then write down the speech’s goal in a single sentence. This point must be clearly identified at the beginning. The speech should be organized so that listeners are guided to this point as they move through the speech.<sup>16</sup> In terms of structure, every speech must have an opening, body and conclusion. The opening catches peoples’ attention and gets them interested in what you have to say. It can be something like a startling question or a very short story. The point is to clearly quickly identify *the point* of why you are talking, and why they should carefully pay attention. The body is what contains the facts, statistics or evidence used for convincing. There should be no more than three to five facts or sub-points that support the big idea. This is because “most listeners will remember only three to five main facts or ideas.”<sup>17</sup> There can be one fact or idea per 3x5 card, but the cards should not be overloaded with all the data—they should be simple reminders of the sub-points, so the speaker is not tempted to read from the cards the entire time. Reading all the data would make the speaker appear insincere and should be avoided (see speech two above). The conclusion should not contain any new material and should drive the listener to the main point which was thought up at the planning stage. The speaker is encouraged to “finish forcefully and confidently” and they are never to apologize for a job not-so-well-done.<sup>18</sup>

It almost goes without saying that structure is important in preaching. There is a tongue-in-cheek joke in the church about pastors being long-winded. Some pastors admit to being “long-winded” as if it were a qualification. But long-winded sermons usually lack organization,

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<sup>15</sup> See chapter two, “What’s the Bid Idea?” in Haddon W. Robinson, *Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages*, third ed. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2014), 15-26.

<sup>16</sup> Toastmasters, *Communication and Leadership Program*, 18.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

are not focused, and therefore are probably not too effective. Structure and focus are essential for good sermons.

#### **Gestures, Eye Contact, Non-Verbal Communication – Speech 4: Show What You Mean**

The next skill the Toastmaster develops deals with non-communication. Scientific research reveals that fifty-five-percent of what we say is from our body language: our physical movement, gestures, facial expressions and eye contact.<sup>19</sup> It is possible for us to say one thing with our words and something different by our non-verbal communication.<sup>20</sup> If this happens—if our non-verbal message conflicts with verbal message—it will leave our audience confused and unconvinced. So, the goal for this speech is to learn how to become aware of our body language. In this speech, the speaker begins to take control of their non-verbal language.

This speech deals with movement, gestures, facial expressions and eye contact. There should be some movement, but not too much. Stiffness seems insincere. At the same time, repetitive movement is distracting (e.g., pacing back and forth or rocking side-to-side). The key with movement is to be intentional. The speaker can step toward the audience to emphasize a point and then step back when finished. Gestures are what is done with the hands and arms when illustrating words or emphasizing what is spoken. These should also be intentional and not forced. Facial expressions are powerful when done right (naturally). When the speaker shows emotion in their face (e.g., sadness, fear, happiness, anger, frustration, boredom) the audience will feel it too and the message becomes more meaningful and moving.<sup>21</sup> We all know how we feel when somebody does not look us in the eyes when talking to us—they seem insincere. It is the same with public speaking: eye contact is very important. Looking people in the eyes makes

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<sup>19</sup> “Public Speaking: the Verbal,” Institute of Public Speaking, accessed August 3, 2018, <https://www.instituteofpublicspeaking.com/body-language/public-speaking-verbal-non-verbal/>.

<sup>20</sup> Toastmasters, *Communication and Leadership Program*, 22.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.



them feel like you are connected and that you care. “Don’t just gaze around the room. Look directly at one person until you finish a thought, then move on to another person.”<sup>22</sup>

It is important to note that trying to get a handle on our non-verbal communication is strange at first. It is usually something we do not even think about. Therefore, any change we make for improvement feels forced at first. Toastmasters says, “Do not worry if at first your movements are stiff and awkward. Natural positions and smooth movements will come with practice.”<sup>23</sup>

### **Pitch, Inflection – Speech 5: Vocal Variety**

Speech five teaches the Toastmaster about vocal variety. The *way* we say something can be as or more important than *what* is being said. Speakers who want to make a lasting impact need to be aware of their volume, pitch, word rate and overall tonal quality. Loud (naturally assertive) people should try to speak more quietly at times and add variation. People who speak softly should try to speak more loudly at times. In addition to raw volume, the speaker should vary the pitch throughout. All this should be natural. The pace or word rate can be adjusted—not too fast, not too slow—and this can be varied for effect too. The most effective overall speaking rate is 125-160 words-per-minute. This is “rapid enough to avoid a boring drone, yet slowly enough to be clearly understood.”<sup>24</sup> The overall quality of the sound can be improved by relaxing and consciously trying to eliminate any tension in the throat. The goal is to strive for a good speaking voice. This type of voice avoids extremes. If the pitch is too high, it indicates nervousness; if too low, it lacks excitement. If the rate too fast, it overwhelms people; if too slow, it will bore people, etc. The goal is “a pleasant tone, conveying friendliness—a natural one that displays the person’s true personality.”<sup>25</sup> This cannot be learned overnight. The first step to

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 26.

become aware of these features. The next step is to make a commitment to improving in these areas over time.

### **Word Choice, Sentence Structure – Speech 6: Work with Words**

Oral communication is different from written communication. It should be less formal and repetitive. The audience gets one chance to understand meaning in a live talk. If they miss what was said, they can't go back and reread it. They become lost and it takes conscious effort for them to reattach themselves to the speaker's train of thought. The way to help listeners who might be lost is to use repetition. Repetition clarifies anything that was missed. It also identifies and helps people remember the important points.

One way to keep people from getting lost is to use short, simple words. Shorter, one-syllable words are always better than multisyllabic words (to academics: don't be a pedantic sesquipedalian!). *Tell* is a better word than *advise*; *show* better than *demonstrate*, *ask* better than *inquire*, etc. When technical or rare words are used there's more of a chance the listener won't know the meaning and become lost. Also, fewer words and shorter sentences are best. It is good to avoid extremes here also. "Short sentences have more power and impact, and audiences will remember them longer. However, a speech made entirely of short sentences can become boring and tedious to hear."<sup>26</sup>

Perhaps the most important tip is to try to become a more vivid and descriptive speaker. A speaker could say, "She picked up the jar and looked at it." But it is better to say, "She picked up the blue porcelain jar and ran her fingers over the smooth surface."<sup>27</sup> This is more vivid and stirs up the imagination of the listener. Literary devices like similes, metaphors and alliteration can also be used. For example, "unless we are careful, it will grow like cancer!" is a powerful simile. And people like to hear it. Saying we "walk the hallowed halls" or must "protect and

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

preserve peace” is also a fun way to say and hear something (this is alliteration). Finally, we should avoid using passive voice whenever possible. Passive voice is where something is done to the subject; active voice is where the subject does something. Saying “the ball was thrown” (passive) is boring and seems a bit foreign. Saying “I threw the ball” (active) is more natural and takes less mental power to unpack. “The active voice uses fewer words, is easier to follow, and sounds more vigorous and interesting.”<sup>28</sup>

### **Tying Skills Together – Speech 7: Apply Your Skills**

No new skills are taught in speech seven. Instead, the speaker puts the skills from all the previous together into one speech. This can be a daunting task and it quickly becomes obvious that becoming a better speaker does not happen overnight. It takes conscious effort and determination to keep applying these skills over a lifetime. But becoming a better speaker also takes self-evaluation.

### **Self-Evaluation**

After speech seven, there is a self-evaluation section in the Basic Manual. The Toastmaster goes through a list of twenty-four statements like this: “I enjoy speaking before an audience;” “I am able to speak effectively without depending heavily on notes;” “I use vocal variety as a means of adding emphasis and feeling to my words;” and “I speak with sincerity, earnestness, and enthusiasm.”<sup>29</sup> The speaker indicates three things: (1) where they felt they were when they started Toastmasters, (2) where they feel they are at today and (3) where they want to be in the future.

A top area of improvement for me was that I was becoming much more comfortable giving speeches. I was also preparing better (I didn’t even know how to prepare before). As a result, I was *actually enjoying* speaking in front of other people more! A top weakness for me

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 39, 40.

was that I was using distracting movements and mannerisms. I also needed to use more eye contact and I was struggling to end my speeches in a definite and memorable way. As stated elsewhere, going through this process reiterates that we are all works-in-progress. There is always room to improve!

### **Using Visuals – Speech 8: Add Impact to Your Speech**

Speech eight deals with using visuals, which can also be very helpful for a preacher. Visuals are a powerful way to (1) emphasize your message, (2) add interest and (3) focus attention.<sup>30</sup> Props can be anything like a book, a ball, a rock, a tool, a kitchen gadget, a hat or an animal. There is a right way to use PowerPoints, videos, handouts and props. Good props have a clear connection to the topic. Adding an unrelated prop just for the sake of having a prop will distract and confuse listeners. A prop should not overpower a message. For example, a long five-minute magic trick for a short thirty second point draws more attention to the trick. Props should be visible to all people and preferably hidden until needed.

The best use of a prop I have ever seen was not in Toastmasters but by a pastor talking about how Jesus was the bread of life (John 6:35). At the final point in the message, he had ushers bring large pans of garlic breadsticks from Pat and Oscars into the sanctuary. The smell of garlic breadsticks filled the room as they pulled off the lids. They began passing them down the rows—to many *very* happy people. The pastor did this without skipping a beat in his delivery. It made such an impact on me that I still remember that sermon ten years later.

### **Persuasion – Speech 9: Persuade with Power**

Speech nine is about persuading people. There are three things to consider: (1) the persuader, (2) the message and (3) the audience.<sup>31</sup> Listeners must like, trust and respect the speaker before they can be persuaded. The persuader must appear knowledgeable about the

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 46.

subject, have a good reputation and be sincere. Regarding the message, there must be a clear goal. What is it that the speaker wants to accomplish? Finally, people in the audience are either favorable to your position, opposed to it, or indifferent. What is the overall attitude of the listeners? Will the speaker be trying to completely change people's view about something? Or will they simply be re-enforcing an existing belief? Each goal has a different approach. A good outline for a persuasive speech is: (1) attention: seize their attention; (2) need: state the need, (3) satisfaction: explain the need can be met; (4) visualization: show how things will be (or won't if rejected); and (5) action: turn commitment into action. A preacher is in the business of persuading people. Therefore, there is much helpful advice here.

### **Inspiration – Speech 10: Inspire Your Audience**

This final speech in the Basic Manual is a type of final-exam where all the skills are put together. It is a bit longer than the others (8-10 minutes) and the speaker is expected to speak about something that will inspire their audience to achieve great things while being confident, forceful, positive and definite.<sup>32</sup>

This type of speech - more than any other - depends on the quality and style of your delivery. Your presentation should be direct and urgent, showing you really care how your listeners react. Your speaking should be controlled and confident with sincerity and enthusiasm. Rely heavily on illustrations and examples. Chose words carefully, aim for heart not head.<sup>33</sup>

### **The Competent Toastmaster Award**

Once this final speech is given the Toastmaster has become a “Competent Toastmaster” (CTM). This is a big sense of accomplishment (and relief!). But the Toastmaster is quickly reminded that there is still plenty of skills to learn. They are encouraged to continue working through advanced manuals. These advanced manuals focus on different areas of improvement. I chose the *Speaking to Inform* manual since informing is a big part of preaching. I also chose *The*

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 52.

*Entertaining Speaker* since I felt weak in the area of telling stories and using humor to keep peoples' attention. Each advanced manual has five speeches and contains clear practical tips like those found in the Basic Manual described above. After completing two advanced manuals the Competent Toastmaster becomes an "Advanced Toastmaster Bronze" (ATM-B). Two more manuals brings the "Advanced Toastmaster Silver" (ATM-S), and two more the "Advanced Toastmaster Gold" (ATM-G).<sup>34</sup> All in all, Toastmasters is an excellent program for learning how to speak more effectively.

### **Surprise: Preachers Are Saying the Same Things**

Here's a surprise: when talking about homiletics, great preachers say the same things as Toastmasters! Many, if not all, of the tips above are found in the writings of Charles Spurgeon, John Stott, Haddon Robinson, Tim Keller, Bryan Chapell—even the grumpy D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones.<sup>35</sup> Spurgeon, the Prince of Preachers, has whole chapters on the voice,<sup>36</sup> posture, physical movements and gestures.<sup>37</sup> His advice to preaching students abounds with practical insights about organization, volume, speed, clarity and vocal variety. John Stott repeats the same. He emphasizes the importance of simple word choice (avoiding "gobbledygook") and says we should use vivid and descriptive words, and "put feeling into it."<sup>38</sup> Like Toastmasters, Stott says we should be open to helpful feedback: "...ask a friend to be candid with you about your voice and mannerisms, especially if they need correction."<sup>39</sup> Stott adds we should also strive to improve in our weak areas: "I know how bad I am at using [illustrations] myself. My friends

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<sup>34</sup> There are other leadership requirements for Silver and Gold such as conducting leadership programs and coaching new members.

<sup>35</sup> Lloyd-Jones is an outspoken critic of gimmicks. Nonetheless, he mentions many of the skills taught in Toastmasters. See chapter five, "The Act of Preaching" in David Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching and Preachers*, 40th ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 95-112.

<sup>36</sup> See lecture eight, "On the Voice" in Charles Haddon Spurgeon, *Lectures to My Students: Vol. 1* (London: Passmore and Alabaster, 1875), 117-135.

<sup>37</sup> See lectures six and seven, "Posture, Action, Gesture, Etc." in *Ibid.*, vol. 2, 150-213.

<sup>38</sup> Stott, *Between Two Worlds*, Kindle loc. 3995-3996.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, Kindle loc. 3969-3970.

keep teasing me about it, and I am trying to improve.”<sup>40</sup> Bryan Chapell talks about using vivid and pertinent details to paint pictures, simplifying language and having a good intro, body, conclusion and transitions.<sup>41</sup> Tim Keller reiterates the need for accessible, well-explained vocabulary, the need to “preach to the heart” by contextualizing communication to reach the listener.<sup>42</sup> Lastly, Haddon Robinson says, “The effectiveness of our sermons depends on two factors: *what* we say and *how* we say it. Both are important.”<sup>43</sup> Therefore his book is filled with tips on logical structure, transitions, style, eye contact, delivery and non-verbal communication.<sup>44</sup> His words sound like they could have been lifted straight from the Toastmasters Basic Manual: “...to be clear, keep your sentences short... clarity increases as sentence length decreases... As you preach, your words [should] tumble out in long, short, or even broken sentences, punctuated by pauses, vocal slides, and variations in pitch, rate, and force.”<sup>45</sup> In short, all great preachers say the same things as Toastmasters.

### **Aristotle Said It Over 2,000 Years Ago**

The reason all great preachers seem to give the same tips is there is a definite art form to good public speaking. Aristotle (384-322 BC) was the first to identify these principles and he penned them in a book titled *Rhetoric* over two-thousand years ago. They still apply today because human nature is still the same. In his book, Aristotle examined why some speakers are successful and others are not. He investigated the use of style, logical flow, word choice, the various parts of the speech, use of evidence, illustrations, tonality—in fact just about everything

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<sup>40</sup> Stott, *Between Two Worlds*, Kindle loc. 3446-3449.

<sup>41</sup> Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon*, third ed. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2018).

<sup>42</sup> Timothy Keller, *Preaching: Communicating Faith in an Age of Skepticism* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2016).

<sup>43</sup> Haddon W. Robinson, *Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages*, third ed. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2014), 149, emphasis mine.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 140.

already covered above. His ancient advice is the same. Consider Aristotle's statement regarding style: "it is not sufficient to know what one ought to say, but one must also know how to say it."<sup>46</sup> Another important tip is: "avoid the appearance of speaking artificially instead of naturally for that which is natural persuades..."<sup>47</sup> He explains using vivid, descriptive language this way: "Use of the description instead of the name of a thing."<sup>48</sup> In other words, it's better to paint a description of an object with colorful adjectives instead of just naming the object. Regarding persuasion he says, "the hearer always sympathizes with one who speaks emotionally..."<sup>49</sup> Aristotle gives the same advice Tim Keller regarding contextualization: "Hearers pay most attention to things that are important, that concern their own interests, that are astonishing, that are agreeable."<sup>50</sup> And this tip from Aristotle sounds like it comes from the Toastmasters Basic Manual, Speech 9: "every speech is composed of three parts: the speaker, the subject... and the person to whom it is addressed."<sup>51</sup> His point is that we should know how to handle all three. It seems that all this practical advice from Spurgeon, Keller, Robinson, Toastmaster, et. al. can be traced back to Aristotle.<sup>52</sup>

### **Preaching is NOT the Same as Public Speaking**

There are many things preachers can do to improve their speaking skills. However, preaching is not merely public speaking. There are many important differences between

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<sup>46</sup> Aristotle, *Aristotle in 23 Volumes*, trans. John Henry Freese, vol. 22, *Rhetoric* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1926), 3a.2.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 3b.4.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 3f.1.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 3g.4.20.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 3n.7.1.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 1c.1.

<sup>52</sup> There is a fantastic dissertation that looks at the history of rhetoric in the church. Rhetoric began to suffer decline three-hundred years ago as a reaction to liberalism. The church wanted greater separation from "the world." These past modern minds had no respect for pre-modern thinkers. As a result, there is little mention of Aristotle in older homiletic books. But recently things have changed. The church seems to be warming up Aristotle's long-forgotten advice. This is evidenced by more books and papers tracing good preaching tips back to Aristotle. See Dave T. McClellan, "Recovering a Classically Oral Homiletic" (PhD diss., Duquesne University, 2008), <https://dsc.duq.edu/etd/900/>.



preaching and delivering a speech. Tim Keller put it well when he said that preaching is not just about technique. He said, “our era has been called the ‘age of technique.’ No civilized society has put more emphasis on results, skills, and charisma—or less emphasis on character, reflection, and depth. This is a major reason why so many of the most successful ministers have a moral failure or lapse.”<sup>53</sup> Surely there is more to preaching than following fanciful technique. And this is the subject of our next section below.

### **The Content of Preaching Is Special Revelation**

The first difference between public speaking and preaching is the message. Preachers preach truth about God and reality that cannot be known apart from God’s revelation. Christianity believes in theism and theism says God is self-revealing. God created the world and is distinct from it, but He has not withdrawn from the world. He desires to stay involved in the world and reveal Himself to His creatures. God has interacted with His creation throughout history in a way where He makes known who He is and what He is all about. Since God took the first step in communicating this revelation, He is rightly called the first Preacher. This revelation has been preserved for us in His Word (the Bible). And as J.I. Packer said, “the Bible is God preaching.”<sup>54</sup> And what does God preach in His Word (the Bible)? It is truth about who God is, what He is like, how man came to be, how man fell into sin, the nature of man, the hope of salvation and future glory. This revelation has a sense of urgency unlike any other—it is of utmost importance. All members of the Trinity are involved in this preaching: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. But God also invites us to join Him in the task. Those who take up God’s call to preach alongside Him become “stewards of the mysteries of God” (1 Cor. 4:1). Public speaking can be about any topic. But preaching is the uniquely special task of communicating God’s special revelation (the Bible).

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<sup>53</sup> Keller, *Preaching*, 195, 196.

<sup>54</sup> Stott, *Between Two Worlds*, Kindle loc. 1468-1471.

### **Preaching Should Be Bible-Centered**

Preaching is also different from public speaking in that there is power and authority. There have been many inspirational messages throughout the history of mankind, but nothing compares to the power of the Word of God. Since the Bible is the only source of spiritual change, the preacher's primary task when communicating is to exposit the Bible. "Ultimately, preaching accomplishes its spiritual purposes not because of the skills or the wisdom of a preacher but because of the power of the Scripture proclaimed."<sup>55</sup> The power of the Word is released into people's lives to the extent that the preacher faithfully uncovers and reveals the meaning of the text before the people.

Therefore, preaching should be bible-centered. God is a self-revealing God and this special revelation has been preserved in the Bible. The task of the preacher is to explain what this Bible means to the people. When the Bible is taught in a way where people "get it," there is transformational power that goes beyond anything that can come from a mere speech. This is because God's Word has power to create (Gen. 1) and to uphold all things (Heb. 1:3). It has power to convict (Jer. 23:29). It has power to accomplish all of God's purposes (Isa 55:10-11). God's Word is so accurate that it cannot err (Psa. 119:160). It is so certain that it cannot fail (Matt. 5:18). It is so lasting that it will endure forever (1 Pet. 1:25). This cannot be said about any other book.

### **Preaching Is Not Self-Improvement**

Much public speaking today deals with self-improvement. Preaching should not be self-improvement. There are two errors that preachers can make. One is falling into legalism by emphasizing works over grace. And the other is by falling into antinomianism (lawlessness) by emphasizing grace over works.<sup>56</sup> The antidote to both extremes is recognizing the real condition

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<sup>55</sup> Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching*, Kindle loc. 299-300.

<sup>56</sup> Keller, *Preaching*, 48-56.

of mankind: we are fallen people who have no hope of change apart from the saving work of Christ and the transformational power of the Holy Spirit. We can easily fall into the trap of preaching “be like” and “be good” messages which merely reduce to self-improvement (e.g., be like Moses here; be like Gideon or Daniel there).<sup>57</sup> The key to avoiding self-improvement is to always be clear about where the source of our strength lies: in Christ. A good way to avoid self-improvement messages is to follow this preaching pattern: (1) here’s what the Bible says you must do; (2) but you can’t; (3) but there was one who did (Christ); (4) only now we can change.<sup>58</sup> The result of this type of preaching is that God’s grace is emphasized over and over again, and when this happens, people are liberated from failure and the bondage of religion.

### **Preaching Should Be Christ-Centered**

The basis of God’s grace for the Christian is Christ. Therefore, in preaching, Christ must be preached. “Sermons may be nothing but good lectures until we ‘get to Jesus,’ at which point they often move from being a Sunday-school lesson to being a sermon.”<sup>59</sup> It is important to show how a biblical text points to Christ. “You can’t properly preach any text—putting it into its rightful place in the whole Bible—unless you show how its themes find their fulfillment in the person of Christ.”<sup>60</sup> However, some preachers go too far in trying to make the gospel fit the text. They allegorize Old Testament passages to see things which really aren’t there—this undermines biblical authority by teaching people the wrong way to approach Scripture.<sup>61</sup> The proper way to be Christ-centered in preaching is to avoid making Christ “magically appear” in every passage of the Bible<sup>62</sup> and instead show “where every text stands in relation to Christ.”<sup>63</sup> Chapell gives

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<sup>57</sup> Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching*, Kindle loc. 7013-7096.

<sup>58</sup> Keller, *Preaching*, 233-235.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 179.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>61</sup> I wrote a short booklet on this topic. See Shawn Nelson, *How Not to Study the Bible: The Dangers of Looking for Deeper Meaning* (Temecula, CA: Geeky Christian, 2013).

<sup>62</sup> Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching*, Kindle loc. 148-149.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 6698-6699.

some valuable advice here. While Christ might not appear in every text, every text does have what he calls a “Fallen Condition Focus” (FCF). This FCF is a mutual fallen human condition resulting from the Fall which shows our need for Christ. Once the preacher identifies the FCF of a text, it is another small step to point towards the solution in Christ. In this way, Christ can be connected to every topic in Scripture.

### **The Preacher Must Have Right Motives**

Some people come to Toastmasters because they want to develop skills that will help them become financially successful in the workplace. People who are better able to speak and lead in front of others are often rewarded with material success in the world. The preacher should not be motivated by financial and material success. Neither should they seek to develop better speaking skills for impressing others or becoming famous. A preacher’s only motivation should be the glory of God alone. There is a fine line between “building up the kingdom” and “building up *my* kingdom” and it comes down to motives. One of the ways to keep our motives in check is to honestly ask ourselves, “*Why* am I preaching?” If we cannot answer this with, “because I love people” or “because I love Christ and want to make him known” then selfish motives may be involved. Even the answer “because I love to teach” is wrong if I lack love. “Sound preaching arises out of two loves—love of the Word of God and love of people.”<sup>64</sup> If I lack love, I am merely making noise.<sup>65</sup> While there might be other motives in public speaking, with preaching, the preacher must be motivated by love.

### **Preaching Relies on the Holy Spirit**

Finally, in public speaking, there are positive results when the techniques described in this paper are used. But in preaching, positive results can only come by means of the Holy

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<sup>64</sup> Keller, *Preaching*, 14.

<sup>65</sup> What Paul said about tongues in 1 Cor. 13:1 seems to apply to preaching too: if I “have not love, I have become sounding brass or a clanging symbol.”

Spirit. Ultimately, we are not able to spiritually change our listeners. Real change can only come by the power of the Holy Spirit. This principle can be drawn from many Scriptures in both the Old and New Testaments. We see it expressed in this statement: “Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain.” (Psa. 127:1) And it surfaces again here: “Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the Lord of hosts.” (Zech. 4:6) Perhaps the climax of this thought can be found in Jesus’ final lesson to his disciples before his crucifixion: “Apart from me you can do nothing.” (John 15:5)

Public speaking skills are good to have, but apart from the work of God, our labor will be fruitless. This thought is both sobering and freeing. It is sobering to think that all this hard work to become better public speakers really gives the preacher no more ability to produce lasting change than before. But it is freeing in that the work really does not depend upon me at all. What a strange and awesome task preaching turns out to be.

### **Why Strive to Improve?**

If preaching success depends on the work of the Holy Spirit, why should the preacher strive to develop better public speaking skills? The same goes for *any* pastoral skill. Why should a pastor develop *any* skill in the ministry? The answer is that there is a synergy between the Holy Spirit and the preacher. God works in harmony with the skills of the preacher. For example, there are practical skills a pastor can learn to become a better counselor—and each pastor should strive to develop them. Is this a denial of the work of the Holy Spirit? Not at all! Dr. Jay Adams, the father of the biblical counseling movement, says, “Methodology and technique, skill and the exercise of gifts are all consonant with the work of the Spirit.”<sup>66</sup> When a pastor’s skillset is more biblically aligned, the Holy Spirit uses the pastor in a greater way to effect change in peoples’ lives. A pastor who ignores the good rules of biblical counseling will

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<sup>66</sup> Jay E. Adams, *Competent to Counsel: Introduction to Nouthetic Counseling*, The Jay Adams Library (Grand Rapids, MI: Ministry Resources Library, 1986), 24.

likely fail as a counselor. The same goes for preaching. The pastor who ignores the rules of good public speaking can expect sub-par results because the Holy Spirit likely will not bring about much success. Therefore, the preacher should continue developing their delivery, while at the same time, relying heavily on the work of the Holy Spirit.

### **Conclusion**

Nearly twenty years ago I set out to see if there was any way a person could learn how to preach better *before* entering the pulpit. I found help in the form of Toastmasters. The principles in Toastmasters are the same principles taught by all great preachers. While there are similarities between public speaking and preaching, there are also big differences. The primary differences are that with preaching the message should be about Christ, must be Bible-centered, has authority and power, and the preacher must rely on the Holy Spirit to effect change in the listeners (avoiding self-help). Yet, there is much the preacher can get from Toastmasters that will help improve their communication skills. The net result is that the message of Christ will be shared more effectively. May God help us achieve the goal of becoming better communicators in sharing the Gospel!

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