

## Self-Evaluation in Preaching

Stuart Olyott\*

*\*Stuart Olyott, born in Pakistan in 1942, was brought up in Asia; Chester, England; and West Wales. He has held pastorates in London, Liverpool and Lausanne and is currently Pastoral Director of the Evangelical Movement of Wales. Dr. Olyott conducted two homiletic seminars at Haddington House, Charlottetown, on October 28, 2006. The first of these, "Boring Sermons – and How Not to Preach Them!", we presented in last year's Haddington House Journal, which proved a great benefit to many. Here we offer the second of those seminars. Despite some editing of the transcription, we have in the main retained the informal, spoken English and interactive style. In addition to the normal use of italics, vocal contributions by the participants are also italicized.*



The subject of our session this afternoon is self-evaluation in preaching. I am going to start by reading, so please follow if you can, from 2 Timothy 4:1-5. Here the older minister speaks to the younger minister.

<sup>1</sup> I charge *you* therefore before God and the Lord Jesus Christ, who will judge the living and the dead at His appearing and His kingdom: <sup>2</sup> Preach the word! Be ready in season *and* out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching. <sup>3</sup> For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, *because* they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; <sup>4</sup> and they will turn *their* ears away from

the truth, and be turned aside to fables. <sup>5</sup> But you be watchful in all things, endure afflictions, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry. (NKJV)

It is impossible, as I said this morning, to overstate the importance of preaching. Preaching in its simplest definition is explaining God's word and explaining what it means to you. There are sixty words used for preaching in the New Testament with four great words which I may refer to as we go along. It is an amazing vocabulary that is used all the time to stress the importance of preaching. The world thinks it is foolishness, but God calls it wise. And that is what we are talking about – preaching and self-evaluation in preaching.

The problem is there is a lot of bad preaching around. If you disagree, please tell me. There is a lot of bad preaching around. How can you improve? Well, some men try to improve by asking their wives, "How did I do today?" That is not always good practice. Some wives are excellent at evaluating preaching; but, frankly, with due respect to all ladies present, some wives are completely hopeless at evaluating preaching. I heard a sermon recently that was preached at a church with which I am very familiar. It was electrifying, it was winsome and it was nonsense. But because it was so interesting, so compelling and so kindly preached, almost everybody afterwards said, "Stuart, what did you think of that? Wasn't that great?" Now, tell me this, how do you say to people that it was nonsense when they are clearly enthused by something? Obviously the average church member is not good at evaluating preaching. The average wife isn't. So what are we going to do?

Some men come out of seminary and they preach quite well. The first few years they preach a bit better, and then they begin to hover. And as the years go by, their preaching begins to deteriorate, little by little, but they do not notice until eventually their preaching is quite bad. It is like gray hairs, isn't it? Did you notice your first gray hair? Did you? Well, there is a verse in the Bible about people having gray hairs and not noticing. And for some people, their preaching begins to deteriorate, begins to get worse and worse, and they just do not notice.

So, how are we going to help ourselves? Often our wives cannot help us; our members cannot help us; frequently our elders cannot help us. We have got to learn to self-evaluate. If I can get outside my own skin and hear myself preach and evaluate myself in the light of definite criteria, I can improve as a preacher as long as I live. If I cannot do that, I am a dead duck. So I am going to talk to you about self-evaluation in preaching.

As you can see from the little outline I gave out (see page 41), I have ten points which I use myself after I preach. Some of these I use as I prepare to preach, but as you will see quickly, some of them can only be used after the act of preaching.

### **Number 1: Exegetical Accuracy**

I want to talk to you, first of all, about exegetical accuracy, and I want to tell you that several things I will say here will overlap with some of the things that were said in “Boring Sermons – and How *Not* to Preach Them!” I often ask students the following question, “Explain the difference and the connection between exegesis, exposition and hermeneutics.” Ladies and gentlemen, exegesis is what we do on our own in the study, in prayer, in the presence of God. Working hard, we discover the intended meaning of the passage. What did the author mean – small “a” author – and what did the Author mean – big “A” Author – when this passage was first spoken or written? What is the intended meaning of the passage? That is what exegesis is. Exposition is what we do in public. We discover the intended meaning of the passage, and we explain it to others. Hermeneutics are the principles of interpretation we use to interpret the Word of God. We all use principles of interpretation. I am talking about exegetical accuracy, and there is not a lot of it around.

I would like you to come with me to Psalm 104, please. Psalm 104, verse 26. Has anyone got the King James Version? Tell me what it is in the NIV version. “There the ships go to and fro, and the leviathan, which you formed to frolic there.” New King James Version? “There the ships sail about.” Any other versions? “There go the ships.” One of the most famous sermons preached in Christian history was preached by C. H. Spurgeon on Psalm 104:26. “There go the ships.” It starts like this: “One day,” he says, “I went down to the seaside, and as I stood on the shore, I saw a ship going by.” What sort of ship was he talking about? Sailing ships. “And I thought to myself,” he said, “isn’t the Christian life like the voyage of a ship.” So he preaches this very fine sermon on the beginning of the Christian life and the continuing of the Christian life and the buffetings and the storms and the calm points and the safe arrival of the ship at its haven. It is really worth reading. But, of course, you have to have a text to preach from, don’t you? Especially if you are preaching in Victorian England. So, his text is, “There go the ships.”

Now, tell me, look at Psalm 104. Is there anything there at all which gives you the slightest hint that verse 26 is about the Christian life

beginning, continuing and concluding? The psalm is about the wonderful works of God and how He appoints heaven above and the grass below and moon and sun and how wonderful and varied are His works. There are living things everywhere and even in the creativity of man, ships sailing on the ocean as well as the great creatures on the ocean, all speak of the greatness of God. That is what the psalm is about. Spurgeon should never, ever have used that text for his sermon, should he? No, he should not. He should have stood in front of his people as he often did, and he should have said, "Brothers and sisters, boys and girls, ladies and gentlemen, I'm going to just tell you a simple parable today about the Christian life. It's like the journey of a ship." But he should not have come to the sermon from that text when the intended meaning of that text is something completely different. That was a very bad example, Mr. Spurgeon. I just thought I had better point out that nobody is perfect.

I would like you to come to Romans chapter 11. This might shock you a little bit, so that is fine. I am not going to explain the chapter because most of you will be wrong in how you understand it, and then we will have a fight. But it does say in Romans chapter 11, verse 29, in the ESV: "The gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable." Any other translations? What does irrevocable mean? Cannot be called back. So Paul is telling us in the context that when God gives something, He does not take it back. When God gives a calling, He does not "uncall". What He is saying has an intended meaning. I went to a very, very big meeting in the north of England, where a famous preacher preached on that text from the King James Version. The King James Version says, "For the gifts and calling of God are without repentance." Now in 1611, "the gifts and calling of God are without repentance" meant to them "the gifts and calling of God are irrevocable". But he explained that God gives salvation even to people who do not repent. "The gifts and calling of God are without repentance." God calls people to salvation – even those who do not repent. What do you think of that? Well, you can tell me what you think. Answer: "*He killed it.*" Yes, and he may, of course, have killed some of the people spiritually as well, telling them that they could actually avail themselves of salvation freely in Jesus Christ without repenting of their sins. It was a disgrace, wasn't it? He only had to consult one or two other versions to see that his interpretation was questionable. But, although it was 1980 something, he did not even take the trouble, it seems, to consult another version of Scripture as he prepared his sermon. It was exegetically inaccurate, distorted, spiritually misleading and spiritually damaging

and perhaps in the lives of some people, spiritually fatal. And so we could go on.

Let us try one more example – Mark chapter 13. This is the discourse of our Lord Jesus Christ on the Mount of Olives. Have you ever heard a sermon on verse seven?

<sup>7</sup> “But when you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be troubled; for *such things* must happen, but the end *is* not yet.

<sup>8</sup> For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. And there will be earthquakes in various places, and there will be famines and troubles. These *are* the beginnings of sorrows.” (NKJV)

Have you ever heard a sermon on those verses? There are a few nods. What was your sermon about? So what is the passage about? Every sermon I have heard on that, except about three which I have preached myself, have been on the Second Coming. Every one of them. But the passage is not about that. The Second Coming is certainly not what it is about. It is talking about something else. There is reference to the Second Coming in Mark 13, but it is not there at that point. And so, someone is standing up as an ambassador of Jesus Christ, with an infallible Book and talking to men and women in all their sin and in all their need and in all their hope, and saying, “God says” what it does not say.

The very first rule of preaching is exegetical accuracy. As I prepare, I have to ask myself, “What is the intended meaning of the author – small ‘a’? What is the intended meaning of the Author – capital ‘A’?” I may come up with two responses to those two questions, and therefore that will affect a great deal of how I preach. But I dare not preach without asking that question.

So how am I going to learn to be a good exegete? *Read the passage in light of all of the Bible.* Yes, soak yourself in the whole of Scripture, because the Bible is a self-interpreting book. In fact, we are told in 2 Timothy 3:16 and 17 that by Scripture alone we can become men and women of God. Soak yourself in the whole book. Never interpret a part without looking at the whole; never look at the whole without looking at the individual parts. Excellent advice. That is where I would start.

Also, soak yourself in exegesis and hermeneutics. What are good principles of interpretation? Which are the ones that have been tried and tested and proved and approved through the long history of the Church of Jesus Christ?

Anything else I can do to make myself a good exegete? Maybe it's simple things. *Read commentaries*. Yes, the Holy Spirit for the last two thousand years has raised up great teachers of the Christian faith, and I cannot live in 2006 and pretend that the Holy Spirit has not raised up great teachers of the Christian faith in all the preceding centuries. I do not just belong to the Christian Church in space; I belong to the Christian Church in time. I am part of that Church, too. So I must look and see what the great teachers whom the Lord has raised up have had to say and be humble enough to maybe be corrected by them.

Anything else I can do? *Pay attention to the genre of the passage*. So when it says that all the trees of the field clap their hands, we are not going to stand up in front of our people and say, "You haven't seen it yet, but you go around your local forest and look very carefully and you'll see that the trees have hands." We are not going to talk such nonsense, are we, because we are dealing with poetry? When the Lord says, "Beware of the wolves that come in sheep's clothing," He is not talking about preachers that wear sweaters, is He? So we have got to be sensitive to the genre. All of this requires time. And I would say to every preacher, take time. If necessary, if possible, preach less so that you preach better. Spend time with the text, prayerfully, working the text, because I dare not stand up in God's name and say that God has said something that God has not said.

Sometimes, however, the commentaries do not help us. We get no light on the subject. We have got to preach on this passage, maybe, because we are preaching consecutively through a book. What do I do now? *Look at the original languages*. Some people have them and some do not have them, but those that do not have them can learn to use all the different helps that we have got today, some of which are on the internet, some of which can be got on CD Rom and some can be got in books.

But here I am still. I have got no light. I am half way through the week. I have still got no light. It is Saturday morning. Now what am I going to do? I have come to the end of Daniel chapter 12 and had to tell my congregation, "I have no idea what this is all about." I think that is often the correct thing to say. I think sometimes we should just go off and find a few Christian friends who are students of the Word of God, and tell them our problem and pray with them and discuss with them and maybe that will help us. But we must be exegetically accurate.

I know we have got ten points down this afternoon, and they are not all going to be as long as this one, but frankly, ladies and gentlemen, if this is only as far as we get, I would be a pretty happy man. Self-evaluation in preaching means I can always go to bed with a clear

conscience on Sunday evening or whenever else I preach and say, “Lord, what I have preached I have preached with a clear conscience, after hard work, genuinely believing that this is what You have said in Your Word. I have not skimmed over it. I have not hurried through it. I have not ignored seeking Your face. I have not ignored the wider Church of Jesus Christ. I have not ignored, as far as I know them, the original languages. I have done my very best to make the meaning of the text plain to the people.” That is the first point in self-evaluation.

### **Number two: Doctrinal Substance**

Recently I met a young man who had been out of seminary about four years and was very conscious of the fact that he had now been out of seminary four years. He had been out of seminary as long as he had been in seminary. It had done something to him. Do you know what he said to me? “Mr. Olyott,” he said, (I am caricaturing him a little bit, but not too much) “I’m a biblical theologian,” he said. “I’m not a systematic theologian.” And, do you know, he sounded very learned. Well, I told him that he was deformed. A theologian has five fingers on his hands. He is an exegetical theologian – he works with the text. He is a biblical theologian – he knows the great story-line of the Bible and where everything and everybody fits. He is a systematic theologian – he knows that the Bible teaches a system of truth. He is a historical theologian – he knows how doctrine has developed through the centuries. And he is a practical theologian – he knows how it works out in the flesh of daily life. “But I’m a biblical theologian,” he says. “I’m not a systematic theologian.” And my answer to him is this, “When you have read the Bible, when you have got the great story-line clear in your mind, when you know exactly who fits where and what fits where on the story-line, and when you preach from a given book and you know all that has been revealed so far and what has not been revealed, when you know all that, when you know all the biblical theology there is to know, you are still dealing with a book that teaches something. And you can say, ‘This book teaches this about God, this about sin, this about the Church, this about salvation, this about judgment.’ When you’ve read the whole book with all your biblical theology, you can still say what the Bible teaches on given subjects. That is what systematic theology is. So to say you are a biblical theologian and not a systematic theologian frankly is nonsense.”

There is a lot of doctrinal illiteracy around. What I mean is that a lot of people just do not understand that system of truth which the Bible contains. When my wife and I had been in Switzerland about six

months, the only officer we had in our church, an older man, an elder, came to me. "Pastor," he said, "you're teaching things we've never heard before." Now, when your church officer tells you that, it is a bit dangerous. Of course, the Swiss are very evasive, you know. If you have met the Swiss, you will know what they are like. He says, "Well, you're teaching us things that we've never heard before."

"Well, yes, you've told me that. Tell me what it is."

He says, "Well, it's like this. In the pulpit you say things that we've never heard before."

This is how it went on for quite a while. The story eventually came out. "I've known all my life," he said, "ever since I came to the Lord, that all my sins were put to the Lord Jesus Christ's account at the cross and that the whole punishment of my sins fell on the Lamb of God, the Divine Substitute. I've known that since the day of my conversion, and all my hopes are based on that."

It was good news, wasn't it?

"But you're telling us that Christ's perfect righteousness has been put to our account, so that God considers us legally to be as holy as His Son. In other words, you're telling us that because of Christ's righteousness imputed to us, God considers us to be as holy as He is. We've never heard that before," he said.

That is doctrinal illiteracy. For when Paul says, "I'm not ashamed of the gospel of Christ," he goes on to say, "because in this gospel the righteousness of God is revealed." The righteousness of God that comes from God and is received by us by faith, from faith to faith, as it is written, "The just (the justified) shall live by faith." That is Paul's gospel, isn't it, imputed righteousness? Doctrinal illiteracy is not understanding this great system of truth which is taught in Scripture. But on Sunday, tomorrow, I am going to preach a passage of Scripture – part of this book I am going to preach. I am going to teach part of the book which teaches the system. So how are the people ever going to understand the system if I do not preach it from the part of Scripture which I am actually preaching from at the moment? Every time I open God's book, I must not only be exegetically accurate; I must be doctrinally substantial, so that their understanding of this great system of truth advances slowly but surely as the pieces fit together and so from God's book itself they understand the system.

Another lady, a very old lady, came up to us when we had been in Switzerland a few months. She had been converted when she was young. By the time she asked her question she had been a Christian almost eighty years. Now she was an unusual lady. She fell asleep in church, but I think that is permitted when you are ninety something.

But that was fine; she was a real woman of God. She said, “You’ve told us that the Lord Jesus Christ today is still a man. Of course He became a man when He was conceived by the Holy Spirit in the womb of the Virgin Mary. Of course He lived as a man and died as a man and rose as a man. But nobody has ever, ever told me,” she said, “that He’s still a man today.” But she was a woman who read the Bible. Do you know what 1 Timothy 2 verse 5 says? “There is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus.” She had read it thousands of times. It had never crossed her mind that the whole mediation of Jesus Christ depends upon the fact that He is still God and man, one person, two distinct natures, and all our hopes lie in that fact. She was doctrinally illiterate.

How could you become more doctrinally literate yourself as a preacher? *Read the great catechisms of the Church.* Yes, of which there are many. Would you like to go a little bit further with that? He says read the confessions and catechisms of the church, but I would go a little bit further than that. *Teach them.* Yes, teach them. I think that is very good advice. I have spent a lot of my ministry teaching the catechisms. *Study the doctrines that are taught in the catechisms.* Yes, I just want someone to say something more. *Obey the truth.* Yes, you have got to obey all the truth you know. You have got to obey it, otherwise your mind is blocked to understanding further truth.

I want to recommend to all of you to learn the Westminster Shorter Catechism. As I said to my friend the other day, it is 107 really good questions and 106½ really good answers! It is actually a very easy catechism to learn. It was written for “those of weaker capacity”. There you have Christian doctrine in capsule, Christian ethics or behaviour in capsule, and Christian piety or your walk with God in capsule – in 107 questions and answers. I read the Shorter Catechism constantly as part of my personal devotions on all normal days and recite between fifteen and twenty questions and answers. I find that keeps that great system of doctrine in front of my mind the whole time. I do not want to ever stray outside the great, big parameters which have been laid down by the Lord Jesus Christ in His Word and discovered and taught by His Church through the centuries. If I found myself believing something that was not in one of the great catechisms, I would suspect my own, sinful heart. For I just cannot believe that I, Stuart Olyott in 2006, am going to come up with something that nobody has ever seen before in the illustrious history of the Christian Church.

**Number 3: Clear Structure**

Now there are two sorts of structure. Sermons need structure. Let me illustrate. Switzerland, November, third week, a strange thing happens. The third week of November every year, if you live in the lowlands, alongside all the roads appear these wooden sticks about two meters high with a red top. Do you know what they are? If you live in the highlands or the mountains, alongside all the roads appear these wooden sticks four or five meters high with red tops. They are snow poles, because when the snow comes down in Switzerland, sometimes you get a meter in a night. It is very strange – you can drive on it. It is like driving on talcum powder, but you can actually drive your car on it. All our snow in Britain is wet, but their snow is like talcum powder. It just compresses. But you cannot see the edge of the road, so you need snow poles. If you can see the poles, you can keep on the road easily.

That is like a sermon. Just think of it. Mrs. Smith in your church has an unconverted husband. She goes home from church, and he says to her, quite out of the blue, “What was the sermon about today?” And she says, “I don’t know if I can tell you.” That is a disgrace, isn’t it? But if she says, “Well, first of all, he said this, and then he said this, and then he said this, and his conclusion was ...”, then he gets the sermon as well because of the clear structure. “I can’t see where he’s going,” people sometimes say in their hearts, and the reason is that the structure is not clear, straight, there in their faces, easy to see.

We need clear, clear structure. But not only macro-structure, also micro-structure. My sermon is made up of sentences. The sentences are made up of phrases. The phrases are made up of words. And we are back to oral style again. I want to talk to you at this point about subordinate clauses. If I say, “I have a cousin, who lives in London, who’s married to a butcher, who lives on the Old Kent Road, where he’s making a very nice living,” I have told you a whole string of facts. I have a cousin, who lives in London (one subordinate clause), where she is married to a butcher, who lives on the Old Kent Road, where he is making a very nice living – there are quite a few subordinate clauses there, aren’t there? Each one depends on the next one. Do not talk like that in the pulpit, please! Please pay attention to your micro structure. “I have a cousin. Do you know where she lives? London. Guess who she’s married to – a butcher. He lives on the Old Kent Road of all places, but he’s making a very nice living.” Isn’t that better? Children, you see, listen to our sermons. Children do not get on very well with lots of subordinate clauses. They get on very well if there is just one.

So we have got to give attention to our micro-structure as well as our macro-structure, but please think about structure every time you preach. You should ask yourself, “Was the structure clear – so clear that it was unforgettable?” I heard a sermon years ago – forty years ago – on the Prodigal Son. It had three points – sick of home, home-sick, home. What do you think of that? I can’t forget it – so simple, so clear, so true to the text. It is there forever. It is part of me. That is what clear structure does. I can remember sermons I heard all those years ago, quite a few of them. And there they are. They live on still because of the clear structure.

#### **Number 4: Vivid Illustration**

Now most sermon makers that I know do the exegesis, they work in the doctrine, they think about the structure and then they get some sense of completion. I have got a sermon. But a sermon is not a sermon until it is preached. Over the years I have learned what I call the green pencil technique, if I use notes. Where there are illustrations, my normal practice is to put a green asterisk on the paper. So I put a green star whenever there is an illustration. If I look down the page and there are not lots of green stars, I re-work the page. There have got to be illustrations. I want to encourage you to use lots and lots of illustrations.

In 2005, I preached to a large conference in Britain in August. In 2006, I was at the same conference but not as the preacher. Several people came over to me to talk to me about what I had said, and do you know what they remembered twelve months later? You know what they remembered – they remembered the illustrations. Amazing, isn’t it?

But people say, “I’m not a good illustrator.” How can you become a good illustrator? Keep your eyes open because illustrations are all around you. Our Lord used things that surrounded Him all the time, events and objects, all the time. And He used them in His teaching. “Well, I’m not a natural illustrator,” says somebody. In fact, most preachers I speak to tell me, “This is where I fall down again and again and again. This is the hardest thing of all for me.”

I will give you two little pieces of advice which have helped me. In your church, do most of the people sit in more or less the same seat every week? That is what they do all over the world, I think. It makes life easy for the preacher. It means that, first of all, we notice if somebody is missing. But, secondly, it means that when everybody has gone home, or in the week when there is nobody there, we can sit down

in the seat; and we can say to ourselves, “That’s where Mr. Jones normally sits.” And we sit down on the seat, and we pretend to be Mr. Jones. What sort of life does he live? Where does he live? Who does he live with. What does he do for a living? What is his normal day like? When does he get up? When does he go to bed? Who does he meet? What are his temptations? What are his joys? How could he get distracted most easily from his walk with the Lord? And we think about Mr. Jones. And we go over there and there sits Mrs. Smith. And we ask all the same questions. We do not do that with every single person each week, but we do it quite regularly to put ourselves in other people’s seats, because we are going to preach to living people, right into their lives. What sort of illustrations, therefore, would help them? That is one thing that has helped me enormously, just that one simple exercise.

Another thing which has helped me is Jay Adam’s advice. When you get to your desk, before you do anything else, he says, invent an illustration and write it down. Once you get used to inventing them, you find you can invent them on the spot, and you need to as a preacher. What do you do when you are preaching, as I once was at a funeral, and one of the people drops dead during the funeral? What do you do? Well, you cannot preach to dead people very easily. There is an interruption, isn’t there? Somehow after the interruption, you are going to have to capture those people again with something appropriate, aren’t you? You must win their sympathy, of course, with everything else that is required. We have all sorts of interruptions – crying babies. God designed the baby’s voice so that no one could possibly concentrate on anything else. There are all sorts of interruptions. Suddenly a chair leg breaks – has that ever happened in your church? Don’t these things happen to you? A light bulb falls out and hits one of the elders. I have had that happen. The flowers fall over. You step backwards and fall off the platform. Unless you learn to illustrate or benefit from these events, unless you can illustrate on the spot, you will never capture your people. So we have got to become illustrators. We have just got to do it. If we invent one every single day, we learn.

Now let us consider the two types of illustrations. I think all story telling is illustration; I do not think all illustration is story telling. So, for example, when our Lord says, “Don’t put your light under a bushel,” in other words a measure, now that is not a story; but immediately it is saying something that can be visualized. Or He says, “You are the light of the world....You are the salt of the earth.” It means something immediately, but it is not a story. When you are explaining a text of Scripture, the illustration serves the text. If it does

not serve the text, it has no purpose whatever. I heard an extraordinary illustration of a man who came home, and his wife had on a gas mask. It was a very amusing story indeed, but I have no idea what was being illustrated. I think it was a waste of time. The man wasted five minutes. I also heard an illustration based on the Great Pyramid, told to a congregation that had never heard of the Great Pyramid. So basically the man had to explain what the Great Pyramid was. That took him ten minutes. Then after that he had to explain his illustration. Why bother? It has got to serve the text simply and easily and shed light upon it. I was told that if you build a chandelier, the chandelier should shed light; but it should not be so beautiful that it draws attention to itself. We put windows in our houses, but we do not live in houses made entirely of glass. That wasn't a story; that was an illustration.

Let us consider briefly the matter of published books of sermon illustrations. Well, I have used some of those books, I have to confess; but I have not found most of the illustrations helpful, although some I have. Spurgeon has also produced three volumes of sermon notes, and there are illustrations for each of the suggested sermons. You can go on the internet, and how many millions of illustrations would you find there? There are whole sites of sermon illustrations. I would be very cautious about using those, personally. I want illustrations that the people will understand immediately. But they must be there, and they must serve the Word. Everything must serve the Word. I do not mind using a machine to sow seed, as long as it sows seed.

Let me conclude with one of the most important ways to learn the art of being a good illustrator. We have got to visit our people, play on the floor with the kids and get out in the yard or the garden with the family. We have got to know our people. Otherwise we will never illustrate properly or speak into their lives – which is why all preachers must visit.

### **Number 5: Pointed Application**

Can I tell you a bit more about Wales? John Jones was a famous Welsh preacher. He was a very nervous man, and first of all he would go up to the top of the hill and preach his sermons in the mists where no one could see him. To this day in his village, there is a rumour that if you go up into the mists, you will hear voices speaking. And that's two hundred years later! When he felt his sermons were reasonably good, he would come down a bit and preach to the sheep. There are twelve million sheep in Wales and only three million people. And then when the sermon was really up to scratch, he would preach it to people.

His philosophy of preaching he put like this: “When I go into the pulpit, I carry on my person several bombs. When I’ve been speaking a few minutes, I throw out one bomb and it kills a number of people. I preach for a few more minutes, and I throw out another bomb. It kills a few more people. And this is my procedure until they’re all dead.” What did he mean? He wanted to speak right into everybody’s life until every single person there in one way or another was impacted by the Word of God and knew what they had to do in the light of the truth which was being preached! That is what we mean when we talk about pointed application.



So, we do not just expound the passage and leave it, because the human heart is very unselfish on one point. It always thinks that anything in the Word of God is for somebody else. It likes to pass it on to somebody else. There are certain truths that apply obviously in a certain way to school children and then in a different way to ladies at home, in a different way to people who go to work and a different way to students and a different way to elderly people. It is the same truth, but it speaks in different ways to different people. And they all have got to know how this truth fleshes out in their particular daily life. That is what we mean by pointed application. There are unconverted people, but some are seekers and some are not. Some are ignorant and some are well informed. Some have been seeking a long time and some have only just begun. Some understand very well the way of salvation, but there is some obstacle; and some do not yet understand very well the way of salvation. So even when we speak to unconverted people, there are different forms of application that have to be given, because not all unconverted people are in the same bracket. There are boys and girls,

and there are all sorts of boys and girls. There are some from Christian homes and some from non-Christian homes. Some of those from Christian homes are converted and some are unconverted. And the same is true of those from non-Christian homes – some are converted and some are unconverted. You cannot just say, “Boys and girls.” There are different sorts of boys and girls. So you have to speak to all the different people in the congregation – not every sermon, but nonetheless, there must be constant application so that everybody knows that the Word of God applies to them and demands something of them, and that they have to make a verdict about what they have heard before that sermon ends. That is what we mean by pointed application.

The Puritans got it wrong. The Puritans had exposition, doctrine and uses. Exposition told you what the passage meant, doctrine told you what truths were taught in the passage and uses explained how the passage applied to you. Sometimes in their uses they went “sixty-firstly, sixty-secondly, sixty-thirdly....” That’s not the way to do it! The Lord did not do it that way, nor should we.

When I was fourteen years old, I was in one of those schools where boxing was compulsory. Have any of you ever boxed? I wore glasses and had to take them off to box. That’s a very great disadvantage. Not only that, but I was very small. So I learnt a trick, which is why I have a reasonably proportioned face today. The trick is this: always talk to your opponent and hit him in the middle of the sentence. Honestly, they expect you to hit them at the end. They do! And I believe the same is true in preaching. They are expecting the application to come at the end, but give it to them when they are not expecting it. Then suddenly it goes home in a way it would not go home otherwise. We are talking about pointed application. When the application begins, preaching begins, said our forefathers.

### **Number 6: Spiritual Urgency**

There is a building of apartments on fire, but the people in the top apartment do not know. Do you know what happens when there is an emergency and you want to use your cell phone? It does not work. You cannot phone them. The phone lines have been burned out. You have got to go up there somehow and tell them that this building is on fire and they are in immediate danger. Right, let’s go up then. Knock, knock. “Excuse me. This block of apartments is on fire. If you stay here, you’ll perish. Good morning.” Is that exegetically accurate? Doctrinally substantial? Was the presentation reasonably clear and logical? Yes, but it would not have any effect, would it?

We have a school of preaching or school of thought in Britain now which absolutely discourages emotional engagement in preaching and just says get the truth clear and leave it like that. I do not believe that. I believe really that if the block of flats is on fire, first of all you go up the flights of stairs pretty quickly. You bang on the door with all you are worth, and you yell, "The flat's on fire! If you stay here, you're going to burn to death. You literally only have thirty seconds to get out, so come now with everybody who's in there. Leave everything else behind and get down!" I think in that case you probably would shout, because the emotion would require it.

There has got to be emotional engagement in preaching. The Christian life is an emotional thing anyway, isn't it? If you do not believe that, then you hardly believe anything, because the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace – and they are pretty emotional things. There is a spiritual urgency about preaching; and if that urgency is not there, it is not preaching. How do you get a man to go up a ladder, over the sandbags and run towards the enemy knowing that he has got a one in ten chance of coming back alive? Of course, that happened for four years in Europe in 1914-1918, didn't it? How do you get men to do that? Do you say, "Now, gentlemen, in a moment I'm going to blow a whistle; and would you be kind enough to go up the ladder and run across towards the machine guns and statistically, one in ten of you will come back?" No, you have got to say, "Listen boys, this is the way it is. If they win, your wives will be raped, your children will have their throats cut and everything that you've ever lived for will be ruined. I know that lots of you won't come back, maybe most of you, but if we can win this war, then we can save these people." And so the sergeant will talk to them like that, won't he? And do you know what will happen? He will blow his whistle, and they will actually run up those ladders and over the top and toward the front, and ninety percent of them will perish. But the war will be won. It will not otherwise.

### **Number 7: Christo-centricity**

"Oh, how I love the Saviour's name. Oh, how I love the Saviour's name. Oh, how I love the Saviour's name, the sweetest name on earth." Yet I sometimes listen to preaching where He is not even mentioned.

I went to a church one Sunday morning. It was full. The music was fantastic, and I like music. If people had been looking at me, they would have seen me levitating. The music was just extraordinary. And the preaching – he was preaching from a minor prophet, and the people were leaning forward and leaning forward as he preached. It was

terrific. So were the refreshments afterwards. Then I went the same Sunday evening to another church a little distance away, where the pianist I think took the Sermon on the Mount a little too literally, because the left hand didn't know what the right hand was doing. It was dumb and glum. Everything was awful. But then I went home and thought about it. And I thought, but where was Christ in the morning? He was not in one song, one prayer, one reading or one part of the sermon. He was absent! And throughout the evening, with all its faults, and it was terrible, He was in every hymn, He was in the reading, He was in the praying and He was in the preaching. It was a disgrace that it was all like that, but I did come to the conclusion that I had only been to one Christian service that day, and it was the evening service.

We glory in the cross. We have nothing else to glory in, have we? We revel in the cross. Spurgeon lived in the nineteenth century. We know that because he said, "If you go to a political meeting, within ten minutes you'll know what they stand for." That is the proof that he lived in the nineteenth century. He said, "But you can go to a Christian church sometimes for months on end and not know what the gospel is." That would be a disaster, wouldn't it? I once met a French student in the streets of Liverpool. I was pleased to meet a French student. So I said, "Have you ever been to a Protestant church?"

He said, "Yes."

I said, "Where did you go?"

He said, "I went to St. Michael's Childwall."

I said, "Great! That's J. C. Ryle's church. Who was the preacher?"

He told me, and it was an evangelical! I said, "What did he tell you?"

He said, "He talked about industrial relationships in Britain today."

It was the only time that man had ever been in a Christian church. It probably was the only time he ever would be. I have never met him since. Is it possible that we would open the Bible and preach to people and not preach Jesus Christ and His cross and His glory and try to do that from every passage? After all, is not all Scripture about Him? Doesn't He say so Himself in Luke chapter 24? So at the end of every sermon, when we self-evaluate, we have to ask, "Was it Christocentric? Did it *focus* on Jesus Christ?"

### **Number 8: Helpful Delivery**

I want to come back to the voice. The voice is God's chosen instrument for preaching – not the trumpet, not the ram's horn, the voice. It is a wonderful instrument. It can be loud, and it can be soft.

Same voice. It can be high, and it can be low. Same voice. You can speak very fast indeed so that almost no one can understand you, but at least you can convey your emotion. And it can be slow. It can be harsh, but it can be so tender. Ask anyone in love. It is a wonderful thing, isn't it? God's chosen instrument for preaching, with all that versatility. So we have got to learn to use it. Did I use the voice properly? Did I go loud when I needed to be loud? Now some young preachers write, "Argument weak. Shout here." Don't bother with that. Did I go loud and soft appropriately? Did I speed up and slow down? Did I change the pitch? Did I change the intonation? Was it natural?

I promised you this morning I would tell you about a man, and I will tell you. When he got into the pulpit, the only way he knew how to speak in church was in a sing-song tone. After several years, his congregation got rather tired of his voice, so they decided that it was about time that he move to a different church. He was very reluctant to go, but they were very anxious that he should disappear as quickly as possible, and they made it perfectly plain. He was a lovely fellow – John. He said to me, "Can you help me?" I said, "Yes, John, I can. What I want you to do every day is to go into the church building when there is nobody there and stand in the pulpit and talk about your cats, talk about your dog, talk about your wife, talk about your children, talk about your garden, talk about your car, talk about Tony Blair, talk about anything you like. Just talk about anything at all except the things of God." And he did that, to give him credit. And, do you know what? When he talked about his dog or his cat or his wife – and there is no significance in this order, by the way – do you know what? He talked normally. It was only when he came to spiritual things that he put on his sing-song voice. Then Sunday came when he went into the pulpit, where he had been speaking all week about ordinary things and had an ordinary voice, and he actually started talking about spiritual things in an ordinary voice. Wonderful that, isn't it? He then resigned from the church and has gone elsewhere and is very happy. True story.

Delivery can be helpful, you know. It can help the message, or it can get in the way.

### **Number 9: Dramatic Power**

Is preaching acting? Is preaching drama? Not the same question. Is preaching acting? Answer – no. The actor, when he comes off the stage, can just put on his ordinary clothes and walk home, can't he? The preacher, when he comes off the stage, has to be ready to die for what he just said. There is no acting there. Is preaching drama? Yes.

There is a man on the platform projecting his voice to an audience, and they are listening to him and watching him.

So there is a dramatic element to preaching, and that dramatic element is important. If you say softly and weakly, "Come unto me, all you who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest," with no feeling and inappropriate gesture, then you are undervaluing, in fact, deforming the message simply by what they see and hear. It is not helpful. So, what people see and the way the message is delivered is also important. If the preacher says in harsh tones, "The gospel is for everyone who wants to come," he doesn't actually give a very good impression, does he? The same words said in a different tone don't give the same impression at all.

I would recommend that twice a year you get yourself videotaped. Not more than twice a year, because you would probably go into a depression. You will be amazed. There is a man who came to our church in Liverpool who said to one of our deacons, "I've never seen a pastor like yours who can interpret into deaf and dumb language at the same time as he's preaching." I have learned to speak on my fingers to deaf people but did not realize my gestures were that bad. But they were. Some of us need to be a bit more restrained. On the other hand, you know, you cannot really speak about glorious things with no motion or expression and convince people of the wonder and glory of it all. Just think if I were speaking to you about the Second Coming of the Lord bursting into the blue on the clouds and us all being caught up to meet Him, and I was standing there like a sentry outside of Buckingham Palace. Something would be missing, wouldn't it? It is not normal.

I am not asking you to be something that you are not. Did you ever hear of Billy Sunday? Ever read his life story? He was a great evangelist, and some believe that as many as a million people came to Christ under his preaching. I think that is probably over-exaggerated, but certainly thousands and thousands of people did. Now he was an ex-baseball player, and he literally used to run across the platform and slide like a baseball player. I am not recommending that. He had thirty sermons and thirty suits, and the same suit always for the same sermon. Now I am not recommending that, but preaching is drama. There is still something to be seen, and we have to get it right.

And, yes, it even affects the way we dress. I once heard a man preaching. He was wearing a red pullover. On the front of the pullover, his wife had knitted a man skiing; and as this preacher preached, he mimicked the actions of skiing. It was quite entertaining. I have no idea

what the sermon was about, but I can remember the skier vividly. Even the way we dress can devalue the message that we preach.

### **Number 10: Supernatural Authority**

“Come home,” my mother said when I was at seminary. She rang me up; she telephoned me. Very unusual. “Come home. Can’t you come home?”

I said, “I can’t come home. I’ve got exams.”

“Come on. You’ve got to come home.”

I said, “Why have I got to come home?”

“There’s a man in the village,” she said.

I said, “What do you mean there’s a man in the village?”

“I can’t explain it on the phone,” she said. “But, he’s different. He’s preaching here all week, and he’s different. Please come home.”

I said, “I can’t.”

And I didn’t. But a year later I heard that man. He was a Welsh man. He was a Welsh-speaking Welshman, which meant that he could either walk or talk, but he could not do both at once. But when he preached, there was just something about the preaching, and you knew in your soul that heaven was speaking to earth. I have never, ever heard a preacher like that before. He was actually quite untidy in the way he dressed, but he was very poor, so maybe that was the reason. When he preached, you knew in your innermost being that not to believe would be the most foolish thing, unthinkable. When he preached, sometimes the congregation sat a full quarter of an hour in silence after he finished. And sometimes after that there was spontaneous prayer – one after another stood to their feet and worshipped God for the glory of the truth that they had just heard. It was always like this. He preached an hour and a quarter virtually always.

And then I went back to the old book which I had read many times as a young man, *Power Through Prayer* by E. M. Bounds, where he talks about under the dew of heaven. He quotes the old Scotsman who said, “Sometimes there’s something in preaching which cannot be defined. You cannot say what it is or where it comes from; but with a sweet violence, it pierces the affections and the conscience and breaks the heart.” Our forefathers called that unction. I don’t think that’s a good word for it, but I don’t know of a better. There is such a thing as unction. There is such a thing as a supernatural authority. There is such a thing as a touch of God upon a preacher. When I self-evaluate, I often need to ask the question, beside all the other nine things, “Was there anything of that at all in the sermon?” And I set my face again to seek

the Lord, confessing my sins, weeping over my sins, and asking the Lord for His glory's sake and for the good of His people and the benefit of the unconverted, if He would give such a blessing as that.

Thank you for listening to me today.

### **Sermon Self-Evaluation Questions**

- #1. *Exegetical accuracy***
- #2. *Doctrinal substance***
- #3. *Clear structure***
- #4. *Vivid illustration***
- #5. *Pointed application***
- #6. *Spiritual urgency***
- #7. *Christo-centricity***
- #8. *Helpful delivery***
- #9. *Dramatic power***
- #10. *Supernatural authority***

### Seminar Questions

**Q.** *Dr. Olyott, would you please comment on the preacher and his use of imagination in speech and the modern use of PowerPoint?*

**A.** I believe the imagination has been given by God. I believe that the best pictures are the ones you carry away in your mind. They are yours, and they remain with you permanently. I believe that people who use PowerPoint generally make their structure too complicated, not memorable, not like that Prodigal Son structure that I told you about earlier on. I believe too many use and rely too heavily on what the people can see there rather than what people can actually see in the actual act of preaching. It nearly always causes lots of eye contact. Very often things go wrong, don't they? I frankly just do not think it is the best way of doing it. I don't think I have ever heard a good sermon preached where there was PowerPoint, not a good sermon.

We used to have a programme on British TV where a woman, or sometimes a man, would come in and sit on a stool and tell a story – on the TV. That is all! Nothing else. No subtitles, no background changing. Just a woman on a stool telling a story. It was one of the most popular children's programmes for probably thirty years. There is still something about oral communication which cannot be captured any other way.

I think probably for most people PowerPoint is a step backwards, not a step forwards. I personally do not even use illustrations and pictures or diagrams with children, unless it is something they cannot imagine. They might not be able to imagine a house in Palestine in the first century. They might not be able to imagine a sailing ship like Paul sailed on in his travels. They might not be able to imagine a Roman centurion. In such cases I would be willing to show them pictures, but anything which they can imagine, I would never personally put up in any visual aid. I just do not think that is the best way of doing it. And you are perfectly free to disagree on that. I am well aware that some of the prophets did use visual aids – sticks and bricks and tiles – but as a general rule I think a man preaching, aware of the dramatic effect, but nonetheless using the Word, is the means that God has been most pleased to bless.

**Q.** *Would you please comment on what preachers should wear when they preach?*

**A.** I think it is cultural. I think you have to be very sensitive to the culture that you live in. I live in the UK in 2006. In my culture, any man who has something important to say wears a jacket, a collar and a tie. If you look at the British House of Commons, for example, every single person will be dressed like that, except the women, obviously. That is the way that people who have something important to say dress. I worked in inner-city Liverpool, I mean in the crime-ridden portion of Liverpool, for twenty-three years and dressed reasonably formally the whole of that time. I never found it a barrier on any occasion whatsoever. So that is the culture in which I work, but I am equally aware that that would not be appropriate in some other cultures. I ministered in Switzerland for nine years. The temperature in Switzerland in our city was thirty-seven degrees (Celsius) for five months of the year. It would have been foolish to wear a jacket to preach in. I was called to preach the Word, not die in a Turkish bath. But there I still wore a tie. The reason I wore a tie is because early in my ministry a man came in and said, "I'm glad you wore a tie today. I'm a visitor. If you hadn't have worn a tie, I would have thought you were a sect." That is the way the Swiss mind thinks. Interesting, isn't it? So, you have to work that out in your own culture. The point is, does it serve the Word or detract from it? That to me is the big thing. If a man comes in dressed in a mohair suit which has obviously cost him four thousand dollars, (I'm exaggerating a bit) I think that would detract from the message. He would be so smart, wouldn't he? I do not dress like Prince Charles, personally.

You have got to know your culture, don't you? Have you ever heard of Wallace and Gromit? They are a type of puppets made of clay that were animated into a very famous British film series. I went to a communion season at a church where the minister stood at the front with a tee shirt with Wallace and Gromit on it. It seems so out of place when I am remembering the crucifixion, the Son of God. It was out of place, wasn't it? That is the point I think that we need to make. Does it serve the Word or does it hinder it? It must serve the message.

**Q.** *Would you comment on “series” preaching and the need for variety?*

**A.** I am convinced of the importance of the systematic, sequential, consecutive teaching of the Word of God. I am convinced of the importance of that. But I think that, within that framework, you do need some variety. Traditionally in Britain, you preach three times a week – twice on the Lord’s Day and once during the week. Throughout my ministry I would have preached twice a week through Bible books and the third time would have been a different form of preaching – biographical or topical or thematic or something like that. I think you do need variety within the total preaching programme. I think the human soul thrives on variety but sameness as well. God gives us different seasons, but only four, and always in the same order. So there is variation, but there is similarity. There is sameness, but there is variety. I think that is the way the Lord works.

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