



I

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The speaker was wearing shorts, and his knees were visibly shaking as he addressed us at the summer house-party. The voice was holding up well, but those knees! At any moment, I thought, they'll give way beneath him. I was taking in everything minutely, because I knew that it would be my turn the next morning – for the first time in my life!

Of course I would not have been due to speak at all had I not been nominated by the team leader.

'Let me do the games,' I had pleaded. 'Maybe I'll do the tennis coaching!'

Eventually I had caved in and agreed to give the required twelve-minute talk. That had been six weeks earlier; now the time had arrived, with twenty-four hours to go.

I was actually word-perfect. I had selected what I thought was an apt Bible sentence relating to my assigned subject of 'Christian Service', and work had begun on my preparation a full month ahead of time. I wrote and re-wrote, put in some stories to illustrate, and added what I hoped were relevant words of application. I had





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then committed the entire talk to memory, and reduced it to notes that would fit into my Bible. For ten days or so I had recited my talk to myself as I lay in bed. And of course I had prayed.

It was the knees that worried me now! The morning of my talk would probably be crisp, I reasoned. I was likely to feel the cold, and my fright would surely intensify the shivering. How could I stop myself from shaking like a jelly in front of those hundred people?

Eventually I hit on the idea of a bath, a really hot one, taken half an hour before the meeting. At the appointed time I emerged from the bathroom, relaxed and even a little limp, and took my place in the front row, ready to be summoned forward. My heart was pounding during the song that preceded the talk:

Come and serve the Master; he alone is true,
He will pardon sinners, therefore pardon you;
He has promised power, power to all who ask;
Power to conquer Satan, power for every task.

Up to the front; turn round and face the crowded room in my white tennis shorts, my breathing rather shallow, mouth dry, my Bible held tightly with both hands.

‘Please sit down.’

The ice was broken. I opened the Bible. There were the notes, ready to prompt me. I began to disgorge the learnt words. My heart was still pounding, but my knees were steady! Help me to keep going, Lord. I’d started.

I never heard of anybody else who took a bath just before speaking. It was a habit I maintained for some years, until I began to feel less shaky. My mother was





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different; she always cleaned her teeth before speaking: 'Must have a clean mouth if you're going to speak for God,' she maintained.

I come, you see, from a family of speakers; both parents, my two brothers and my sister. The tradition seems to go back to a Tuesday night, September 26th, 1882, when my grandpa, Tommy, a boy of fourteen, responded to a mission address by the famed American preacher, D.L. Moody, then on a visit to Plymouth. Tommy was to become a preacher himself.

Years later my older brother Peter was preparing for his first talk.

'Don't go on too long!' he was warned.

'No, all right; I'll cut it down a little.'

A few more days passed.

Are you sure you won't exceed fifteen minutes?' he was asked, the day before the meeting.

'Um, well ... I hope not.' Dutifully he excised yet more material from his notes.

The talk, when it was given, lasted for three minutes flat.

The renowned Billy Graham, when aged eighteen, hardly believed he could speak at all. In tongue-tied admiration he accompanied his friend Grady Wilson to a meeting of twenty people at the 18th Street Mission in Charlotte, North Carolina. Grady elected to speak on a theme, *God's Four Questions*, borrowed out of a book. Billy thought to himself, 'How can my pal Grady keep going so fluently?' After speaking for half an hour, Grady paused: 'Now we come to God's second question!' (from *Just as I am*, Billy Graham: Harper Collins).





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When Billy Graham did begin to get going, as often as not he would be practising his outlines to the rabbits in the early morning, or to the alligators in the cypress swamps – just to see if he could do it.

Public speaking – are people born or made for such a task? The question is immaterial once we can give the question a God-centred twist: *Is public speaking something that a person is called to?*

Once we can recognise this as the vital issue, then never mind whether you are a ‘natural’ or a ‘made’ speaker – you will dedicate yourself to the fulfilling of the call as you become aware that it has come to *you*. In no biblical case that I can recall was there ever a speaker for God and his people who was self-appointed. It was only the false prophets who set *themselves* up to speak in God’s name:

I did not send these prophets, yet they have run with their message; I did not speak to them, yet they have prophesied (Jer. 23:21).

How, then, in our present Christian era, can we discern a call from God to speak his word, let alone act upon it? It would, after all, be a terrible thing to stand up and speak a message for God if he has *not* summoned us to do so! Three guidelines will help.

Let the church recognise your speaking

It is right, of course that a flame is lit directly within the convictions of God’s messenger. The Old Testament prophet Jeremiah was aware of an uncontainable fire burning inside himself (Jer. 20:9). In New Testament days the apostles Peter and John, faced by an official ban on





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their public speaking, replied, 'We cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard' (Acts 4:20). Martyrs down the centuries, evangelists great and small, street preachers, Sunday School teachers and missionaries have all sensed a similar urge.

The morning after his dramatic conversion at the tent meeting he had intended to blow up with explosives, Stephen Lungu of Malawi was out, speaking on the buses! Although he now carried a Bible, he could neither read nor write; he was still sleeping under a bridge and eating out of trash cans. But for him it was the start of a lifetime of speaking; the flame had been lit.

Acknowledging all of this, we must recognise that it is to the church at large – *and to no other group on earth* – that the responsibility for declaring the message of God has been entrusted (Eph. 3:10). There must come a point, then, when every Christian who senses an inward urge to speak must come to terms with the church of Jesus Christ. Do the believers, who make up the church, recognise that this speaker has a call? If so, let *them* issue the invitation to speak, and provide a suitable format and platform.

Await your moment. Test your abilities separately, by all means, as Billy Graham did with his alligator addresses. Consult quietly with friends and advisors. But then leave it to others to take the initiative in getting you on your feet. Let God, through his people, *push* you into the arena, rather than push yourself forward. Let the church recognise your speaking, when it is ready to do so.

Let the church harness your speaking

You are not acting on your own account, but as part of a movement of witness called into being by Christ himself.





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That is our context and framework as Christian public speakers. We are part of a larger outfit.

On occasions I have seen street orators at work in one or other of the world's cities. I may be handed a piece of literature at the same time. Inevitably I will turn to the back of the pamphlet with curiosity. Who does this speaker represent? Where is this message coming from? What are the credentials – or is the speaker self-appointed? It seems vital that God's messengers should be thoroughly accredited; in our case we must be in good standing with other Christians.

There is great protection when our speaking can be done within the partnership of the Christian fellowship and with its blessing. It means that we are standing with others, and they with us, in the great commission of Christ. But there is also power in such identification with the rest of the church, every time we open our mouth! It means that we can be sure of invaluable prayer support.

Years ago I was involved in a 'guest service' that was held in a church I used to lead at Harold Wood, in North-East London. I was the preacher for this special occasion of Christian outreach to friends and neighbours. Afterwards it emerged that the deputy headmaster of a nearby school, as a result of the service, had responded to the claim of Christ for the first time. But it was not my speaking that had particularly arrested his attention.

'It was your church treasurer,' he told me later. 'You got that man up at the front, half-way through the service, to tell us all how he had come to faith. He only spoke for five minutes. But in those five minutes I





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sensed something that I had never come across before. I could *feel* the whole congregation pulling for that man, unitedly. The experience completely bowled me over.'

Whether giving children's talks, speaking in the open air, leading campus Bible studies or addressing a sports meeting, the public speaker needs to have some recognisable corporate backing. One way or another, it should be the church that harnesses your speaking.

Let the church endorse your speaking

Who should benefit from your utterances? Ultimately the church! Your talks should so tie in to building up the life and health of the church, that it can be no other than a living tribute to your spirit of servanthood. Today there are too many speakers who consistently undermine and detract from the work of the churches. Worse, there are plenty of practitioners who are little better than self-serving spivs. They do not point their listeners in the direction of Christ and his people, but towards themselves and their own platform and interests. Frequently they have blown up some side-issue of Christian belief into a major tenet. They are described in the New Testament as 'blemishes' in the Christian fellowship, as 'shepherds who feed only themselves' (Jude 12).

By contrast, the apostle Paul writes in glowing terms of those he describes as 'partners' and 'fellow workers'. What they do, they do for the churches:

As for our brethren, they are messengers of the churches,
the glory of Christ (2 Cor. 8:23 RSV).





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That is a wonderful description of speakers we can think of, on every continent, who have made it the business of their lives to support the faith and growth of churches everywhere. We love them. We love them for their hard work on our behalf, as they grapple with the message of the Scriptures and make it relevant. How glad we are when they come to our locality! We can live in the glow of their dedicated speaking for days.

Is it just possible that your speaking could actually be used to change a life? To unite a family? To transform the outlook of someone's workplace? Believe me, it happens. As I write this chapter, I think of a speaker, a relative unknown, working and studying in our own capital city of London. On delivering a single talk, on a controversial issue, in one of Britain's university cities, it was reported in the following week that his visit had altered the atmosphere of an entire college for the better.

These things begin — however small — with the God who calls and equips. We can believe that the scales are tilted in our favour. 'One word of truth outweighs the whole world,' wrote Alexander Solzhenitsyn; 'The truth is more powerful than tanks.'

'Give me,' said John Wesley, 'a hundred people who love God with all their hearts and fear nothing but sin, and I will move the world.'

Or to quote my own grandfather in some words that eventually found their way into my schoolboy's autograph album:

I am only one,
But I am one;





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I cannot do everything,
But I can do something.
What I can do,
I ought to do;
And what I ought to do,
By the grace of God I will do.

Why not make the great beginning as a speaker? But see to it that your fellow-believers are behind you and with you!

