

LESSON SEVEN

Presenting the Bible Study Lesson

The elocution movement of the nineteenth century had rigid rules for delivery. It taught that there was but one way to stand, gesture, and sound. A public speaker who did not know the rules failed miserably. Today's standard is natural delivery – the successful speaker sounds like himself when addressing a subject in which he is deeply interested. Remembering Phillips Brooks definition of teacher¹ – God's truth presented through personality – and applying it to delivery, the class expects the lesson to contain truth expressed through the teacher's personality in a manner that reflects the gravity of the message.

This means that the first, if not the only, rule of teaching style is for the teacher to be himself. Imitation of the style of other teachers, even great teachers, may be the sincerest form of flattery, but it is also the surest formula for failure. Learning from the past is admirable; leaning on the past is inappropriate.

¹ The content of this concluding lesson was part of a series of articles published in the *Firm Foundation*, published by Buster Dobbs. They also apply to the teacher of God's word and are so adapted and applied here. For example, "teacher" has been changed to "teacher" and "class" has been changed to "class."

But what is natural delivery? Natural delivery, sometimes called conversational style, does not mean that the lesson is delivered as if the teacher were in one-on-one conversation. Even in casual conversation, the speaker's fervor increases in relation to the number of persons addressed and the intensity that the speaker brings to the subject. Since the lesson relates to the eternal, sincerity and intensity should not be a problem.

How is conversational style achieved? Listen! Listen to others. Listen to yourself. When you speak one-on-one, you use gestures but you don't think about them. They happen naturally. When you speak one-on-one, your voice rises and falls naturally with the topic and the emphasis that the topic justifies. You don't think, "I should get louder here and softer there." It just happens. The same should be true of teaching. Proper gestures and use of the voice should "just happen" as naturally as they do in one-on-one conversation.

If conversational style is as easy as talking over a kitchen table or a back yard fence, why is it so difficult to achieve in the classroom? Could the answer be "intimidation"? After all, the hearers are watching the teacher's every move and listening to his every word. Doesn't this call for something different? Even if it doesn't call for something different, it often produces something different. The hearers' fixed attention affects the teacher as a

snake's hypnotic stare paralyzes its prey – it robs him of his ability to act naturally. Thus, the greatest challenge to effective communication is for the teacher to maintain a style that is natural to him instead of developing atypical characteristics.

Since even the most experienced teacher can experience some intimidation when he faces a class, what hope is there for the rest? How can a teacher in a pressure cooker be natural? Proper lesson preparation reduces intimidation because it eliminates any worry about what the teacher is trying to accomplish and how he plans to accomplish it. Understanding guidelines for natural delivery helps because it eliminates worry about how best to change one's style and frees the teacher to be himself. Before examining specific guidelines, however, one warning must be given. The message is best communicated when the delivery is transparent. Ostentatious delivery (whether of voice, gesture, or vocabulary) and monotone delivery are opposite ends of the same spectrum. Both draw attention to themselves. When style predominates in the hearer's perception, the message gets lost. If anything is remembered, it will be the messenger. The teacher's goal must always be to get out of the way of the message. The true messenger always stands behind the cross.

Public speaking, like most other activities, has tools – the voice and gesture. The use of those tools is determined by the nature of the occasion, the class, and the message. The use of each tool should be varied, appropriate, and purposeful. Purpose may dictate that certain standards of delivery will be employed, while others will be ignored, or even broken. While some may contend that such rules and considerations are foreign to teaching, this will not be the attitude of those who wish to do their best in communicating the life-giving soul-saving gospel of Jesus Christ.

1. The voice. Not every teacher is blessed with a great speaking voice. Fortunately, a great voice is not a requirement for effective teaching. While a “nasal twang,” a raspy voice, or a very soft-spoken voice may be distracting, none is fatal. There have been successful teachers with each of those qualities because the sincerity of the speaker has enabled the hearers to “see past” the voice to the Christ. However, a teacher whose voice is poor should not neglect the development of his voice even though he may succeed without it. He owes it to himself, to his hearers, and, above all, to his Lord to become the best that he can be. While the many intricacies of professional voice development can be dizzying, there is one basic rule that can always be remembered and applied – be sure that it fills the auditorium or

classroom, but speak to each individual. Proper volume enables those most distant from you to easily hear. When reduced volume is necessary for effect, speak closer to the microphone so that those in the back can still hear easily. While loudness can be effective; surprise loudness jolts the adults and scares the children. Proper variety in volume, tone, and pace should be used to convey different thought and feelings in the lesson. Words lose their color and meaning when delivered at the same volume and pace. Delivery may vary from low and slow to high and fast, but it should always be suited to what the words mean – joy, sorrow, seriousness, humor, or contemplation. Words of feeling spoken without feeling convey no emotion to the hearer.

2. The gesture. Effective communication harmonizes spoken language and body language. If the spoken language and body language are different, the hearers are confused. Further, they are more apt to believe the body language. Since the eye is the primary instrument of gesture, good body language begins with good eye contact. A teacher who looks at the walls or above his hearers' heads cannot adequately convey the significance of the cross of Christ or of the empty tomb. Some teachers look in the hearers' eyes only when they look up from

their notes. They are too note-bound to have consistent meaningful eye contact. It is better for the teacher to miss a phrase occasionally than to show mainly the top of his head while reading most of the lesson. Include everyone. Scan the assembly, but pause briefly on specific sets of eyes as points are made. Facial animation is also a form of gesture. Smile, scowl, grin, or grimace, but don't be a deadpan. A motionless face usually ties down the voice as well. It conveys the message, "I have no feeling about what I am saying." A frozen face applies ice to the soul. The hands are most commonly associated with gestures. They are also often the most troublesome. Should they hang at the side? Should they rest on the edge of the lectern? Should they be clasped in front of the chest? Different sources give different advice, but each is trying to encourage the natural, animated use of the hands in the same manner as they are used in conversation. In conversation the hands are rarely at the side. Seldom is there anything to grip. Less often are they clasped piously in front of the chest. Because the hands are free, they are generally moving in harmony with the voice, emphasizing points and demonstrating sincerity and enthusiasm. When the hands do less in the classroom than in one-on-one conversation, the teacher appears

- awkward and uncomfortable. Care should be taken not to gesture for each word or syllable. Too frequent gestures confuse because they indicate that each word or syllable is of equal importance.
3. The posture. Finally, give attention to posture. Face the hearers squarely. Hold your head up with the chin level. Never tilt the head back lest it appear that you are “talking down your nose” to the hearers. Lean slightly toward the hearers. While leaning on the lectern may convey a desire for closeness, leaning too long conveys weakness – the lectern has become a crutch. If you have the luxury of a traveling microphone, occasionally move from behind the lectern to the right or left. This removes a wall from between the teacher and the hearers. Movement should occur during transitional points in the lesson. Avoid making strong points while moving backward because the direction of movement contradicts the point. Too much movement, swaying, or bobbing, however, appears more as eccentricities than as a desire to get close to the hearers.

Don't let concerns about your voice, gestures, or posture turn you into a statue. Strive to be natural. A little practice will help until you feel comfortable. Proper preparation combined with a natural delivery will enable both the teacher and his hearers to look forward to the lesson.