

A Practical Guide for Priesthood

General “how to” best practices that may help your service be more effectual.



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2023

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Introduction

Who should read or use this Guide?

This “Practical Guide for Priesthood” is intended for anyone who has an interest in the possibility of learning how they might improve the way they perform their priesthood duties and service. As such, this Guide may not be particularly useful for those in the priesthood that are very experienced and productive. This Guide has been prepared with the intention of helping anyone who feels that they can improve and are willing to do so if it means serving the Lord Jesus Christ more productively.

If any man have ears to hear, let him hear.

- *Mark 7:16, King James Version, Inspired Version*

While most of the subjects are useful for anyone who serves in the priesthood some of the subjects discussed in these pages may be specific to elders or priests. Both authors of this Guide served previously as deacons and have found the principles of service learned during their years as deacons applies equally to their service as priests and elders, with notable differences related to specific priesthood duties.

Although specific priesthood duties may vary somewhat from office to office, the function of all priesthood is to bring ministry to those who need it by faithfully serving the Lord Jesus Christ, whose purpose is to bring salvation to the souls of men and women. That may mean teaching, preaching, administering the ordinances of the Gospel or otherwise doing what the Lord may instruct from time to time. We each have something to contribute towards that most sacred objective.

There is just one priesthood: the priesthood after the order of the Son of God. There is no room in the priesthood for the belief that there is no need to serve because there are others who have “higher authority” or that are more “skillful” in particular aspects of the ministry. It is a holy calling requiring simple humility and careful diligence to perform those spiritual duties.

The authors are neither perfect nor the most experienced priesthood that have ever lived. There is only one who can claim both – Jesus Christ. Rather than telling all priesthood that they must change we present this as a series of helpful guidelines that may be useful for any who feel their ministry can improve by gaining understanding about general aspects of the subjects discussed in the following pages.

Should I change how I do things?

But now hath God set the members, every one of them, in the body as it hath pleased him.

And if they were all one member, where were the body?

But now are they many members, yet but one body.

And the eye cannot say unto the hand, I have no need of thee; nor again the head to the feet, I have no need of you.

Nay, much more those members of the body, which seem to be more feeble, are necessary;

And those members of the body, which we think to be less honorable, upon these we bestow more abundant honor; and our uncomely parts have more abundant comeliness.

For our comely parts have no need; but God hath tempered the body together, having given more abundant honor to that part which lacked,

That there should be no schism in the body, but that the members should have the same care one for another.

And whether one member suffer, all the members suffer with it; or one member be honored, all the members rejoice with it.

Now ye are the body of Christ and members in particular.

- 1 Corinthians 12:18-27

To answer the leading question, “Should I change how I do things?” we should make it clear that it is not the intention of this Guide to simply stir the pot and see what chaos may result. Every person has their own mannerisms, styles, and approaches that may or may not work effectively in the ministry. It’s important to be honest with yourself. Do your sermons get the vague distant stares of people that aren’t really following what you’re saying? Do you have a small collection of participants in classes while the majority are afraid to speak up? There are solutions to these problems. Identifying them is only the first step.

Much of ministry improves over time because of the exercise of priesthood duties. Each time a sermon is given, a class is taught, a prayer is offered, or a priesthood visit is finished there is the opportunity to reflect upon what worked, what didn’t work and to consider what can be done differently if the outcome wasn’t as expected or desired. Priesthood carries with it responsibility. What that means is being willing to learn hard lessons, or to be humble enough to accept correction if there is something that hinders your ability to serve effectively as a minister of Jesus Christ. If there is nothing to be improved upon that is wonderful, but don’t let personal pride hinder your success as a minister.

It may be tempting for you to draw the conclusion that your ministry is not successful because you have failed in some respect. That is not always the case. Sermons can only be heard by those willing to listen. Classes only teach those who are invested in learning. Not all people receiving priesthood into their homes are going to do so as though you are the angels of God from heaven. Being honest with yourself means accepting faults as well as accepting that others may not be open to receiving that ministry. Agency means choosing, which leads some to choose “no”: even Jesus Himself did not convert all of those in Israel during his ministry.

Being good at one thing does not automatically make one good at other things. There are some who are more naturally gifted at preaching than they are at teaching, and vice versa. There are some whose home ministry is comfortable while others are nervous.

Recognizing what we are weakest at and improving upon those weaknesses is sometimes difficult and can be embarrassing. The Lord made Aaron a good speaker while Moses struggled; yet we still consider Moses to have been a great prophet. There is an entire spectrum of giftedness in lots of different areas, so improvements are not something to be frowned upon, feared, or rejected; rather, they should be viewed as opportunities to grow spiritually.

That’s not how I think you should do it

There is an uncomfortable truth in presenting anything under the guise of advice: it may not work for everyone. The authors are keenly aware that an experienced minister may have a completely different approach to how he ministers in a way which works very well for him. That is totally acceptable. The Spirit of the Lord isn’t limited by the frailties of man.

The Spirit of the Lord often uses similar approaches for a lot of people because not all have a natural and inexplicable gift. If your ministry is working exceptionally well this Guide may not be for you. Learning from others is often the key to growing and improving for the rest of us. Be advised that the way you conduct your ministry as a priesthood member may not be suitable for others that have less experience than you do.

This Guide is not written by way of commandment, so it is not requisite that you are obligated to learn from it. It’s expected that your opinions may differ from those of the authors. The Gospel of Christ has a foundation which consists of Jesus Christ. If Jesus tells us to do something a certain way, we actually are obligated to do it that certain way regardless of opinion. For many other things

we've been given a lot of freedom as long as we don't compromise the integrity of the work, the word or the mission.

The goal of priesthood

And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers—

For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ,

Till we, in the unity of the faith, all come to the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ,

- Ephesians 4:11-13

The priesthood has been given an important task. How we conduct those tasks is vital to the successful completion of those tasks as outlined by Paul in his letter to the saints at Ephesus.

Whether it is the “lowly” deacons or the most highly “esteemed” apostles, all have responsibilities. Not one of them called themselves to the priesthood but were called and ordained by the power and the voice of the Holy Ghost. That is something special and is a gift that must be tended to, or it will lose its value in your life and in the lives of others.

What we do as a priesthood, and as ministers in particular, matters. It matters enough that God established ordinances and set forth commandments regarding them such that His major work of bringing about the immortality and eternal life of man depends in no small part on the performance of those tasks.

Whether you are a deacon, teacher, priest, elder, high priest, bishop, seventy, patriarch/evangelist, apostle or prophet, you have been given a gift from God with responsibility. You are also given promises that if you are faithful in using the priesthood you shall receive the joy of the Lord's presence, needing to not be ashamed.

Study to show thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.

- 2 Timothy 2:15

But none of these things move me; neither count I my life dear unto myself, so that I might finish my course with joy and the ministry which I have received of the Lord Jesus, to testify the gospel of the grace of God.

- Acts 20:24

As you read and consider what we have included in this Guide it is hoped that you may do so with an open, honest mind and heart; that you might glean from it only what was intended; that you might not be hindered by its faults, and gain from it those tools that can further your work and ministry in the building of the Kingdom of God and the establishment of His righteousness in Truth and in Spirit. Amen.

Sermons

Purpose

Perhaps one of the most visible aspects of ministry is, of course, the sermon. When preparing for and presenting a sermon there are several key aspects to keep in mind:

1. Sermons are first and foremost a means for promoting the Gospel of Christ.
2. Sermons are not a place for promoting a business, political or personal agenda.
3. Sermons are intended to provide a persuasive argument for obedience to the Gospel of Christ.
4. Sermons may be heard or seen by people from all walks of life and in all stages of life, not only those whom you may be familiar with, not only by church members and not only by friends.
5. Sermons should be wide enough ranging to cover the subject, concise enough to be comprehended and interesting enough to lead the audience to consider it.
6. Sermons that are not interesting may serve no purpose.
7. Sermons that are not from the heart cannot reach the heart.

Public speaking for some people is as natural a talent as breathing, but for many – if not most people – it can be a challenge not just to do, but to do well. There are a lot of “do’s and don’ts” associated with speaking for the intent of persuading the audience to walk in the Gospel footsteps of Christ. It is of great importance to remember that this is the primary purpose of sermons.

We are quite sure that everyone reading this Guide has heard good sermons, bad sermons, and probably some great sermons. Sermons with a lot of humor, or that unfold a single scriptural mystery, or that get side-tracked with unrelated testimonies may be well-received, but if the focus on the Gospel is lost it may well not serve that primary purpose.

At every stage of development of sermons, either in preparation or presentation, remind yourself about what you are trying to do and perhaps more importantly, ask if this is something Christ would want you to do. If you are doing this with the right intent and are diligent with the truth, you may be surprised at how well it works out.

Preparation

We've all heard the testimonies of experienced preachers that "never had to prepare anything for a sermon – I just let the Spirit lead me and the words flow out of my mouth." Seldom is the case even for them that it did not come without some degree of preparation in the form of prayer, study and supplication to the Lord. The difference between giving a speech and preaching a sermon is one of intent and of authority. While anyone can do public speaking – some do it very well – not all public speaking is in the form of sermons. Motivational speakers are abundant, and well received, but their intent is often themselves because they have something to sell. A preacher giving a sermon is called and ordained to speak in the name of Jesus Christ so that souls might be saved.

There is therefore a difference between standing in front of an audience and giving a prepared speech versus standing in front of an audience to persuade them towards a change in their lives to serve God. There are some sermons that are qualified public speeches but which may possess little of the Gospel message. It is the responsibility of the priesthood member that is speaking to make the difference between a speech and a sermon worth noting. Preparation for a sermon can make the difference between speaking words and giving spiritual food.

The experiences of the authors of this Guide can attest to how difficult the first objective may be to reach: finding a subject on which to preach. We can all agree that Jesus Christ is our subject with an almost infinite number of ways to approach that subject. This is part of what takes place in the first phase of sermon development. While you may find yourself latching onto a subject early do not be afraid to adjust it as you progress through developing the sermon. By prayer and study your subject may well become more clearly defined.

Think about these steps in preparing for giving a sermon even though they may appear more than once in your preparation or in slightly different order:

1. Prayer
2. Study
3. Time to think and listen
4. Time to develop details
5. Time to organize thoughts logically

How you do these things is not particularly important to this discussion – only that you do them. The way that you pray, study or think is not something that can be covered in a Guide such as this. It is presumed that as an adult or young adult called to the priesthood you have already learned or are learning these skills. They may well develop naturally as you mature spiritually.

In relation to the term “logically” (item #5 above) there is room for some discussion. This may not always be intuitively obvious for everyone. In most cases people need to be able to follow the course of a series of thoughts in a sequence from step 1 to step 2 to step 3, etc., which a reasonable person can make sense of without having to go through mental gymnastics. In other words, a presentation that relates flowers to airplanes then moves from airplanes to oak trees is not one that most people would be able to follow. Take a step back from yourself and see if it would make sense to someone hearing it for the first time.

In any form of public speaking, it is good to consider your audience. If you have the privilege of knowing that your audience will be young adults, middle-aged, older or a mixture of all it can help you to tailor your manner of presentation for greatest effect. If you know whether they will be largely members, non-members or a mixture it can have an effect upon your approach to the subject. At the moment you begin speaking you may have to adjust it further.

No amount of preparation is a substitute for being able to think on your feet. Circumstances and audiences may change, leading your prepared remarks to be not as effective as originally intended. It is here where we have to be ready to do two things: adapt and listen. We may need to adapt our sermon if we originally expected children to be the primary audience but discover that we have middle-aged or older adults in the audience. The reasons for this should be clear, so it is left to the reader to think upon those details. The “listen” aspect is to be willing to accept the leadings of the Spirit of God as He directs you knowing that there may be circumstances or individuals whom God wants you to speak to according to His will. There are myriad different reasons for why this may be the case.

If you feel no such “leadings” or are not familiar with that sense, do not feel bad. Trust the Lord. Your preparations may be exactly how the Lord directed you. The Lord will direct your sermon as needed even if you feel nothing at all when done in all sincerity of heart.

As a follower of Christ and a reader of history you may be inclined to think that you should have a revelation or prophecy to present during your sermon or some other gift of the Spirit. That is simply a false expectation. There is no such requirement placed upon us anywhere in scripture and any expectation of this may come from a misunderstanding of history or of how God works with people. If you do feel that a prophecy or revelation needs to be given, however, you should first consult with the presiding officer (whether elder, priest, teacher or deacon,) so that you might have a second witness. Prophecies, revelations or the other gifts of the Spirit can be a fruitful source of problems both for your ministry and the congregation despite good intentions, particularly if they are not supported by a second witness.

Consider this bit of advice that we find from the Doctrine and Covenants:

Prophesying over them that are sick in administering to them has been a fruitful source of trouble among my people.

They must observe that this they are not required to do except there be a direct manifestation of the Spirit which may direct it.

Pray over the sick, anoint them with oil, as commanded in the law, and leave them in my hands, that the Spirit may deal with them according to my wisdom.

Many spiritual manifestations have been had. Some of these have been false, and under the operation of the law which I gave many, many years ago, those who make these false presentations are not to be feared among my people.

They are not justified in permitting their human sympathies to overcome that which has been written in my Scriptures. The spirit of the prophets is subject to the prophets.

- Doctrine and Covenants 125:15a-e

While this revelation may provide direction more specifically related to administering to the sick there may well be room to consider this as general sound advice for other aspects of the ministry also. Being “caught up in the moment” is not terribly unusual but as someone representing Christ the priesthood is not entitled to free reign to do whatever they please. This may sound harsh but there is a reality in which an emotional moment may deliver the wrong message, and the emotional moment may feel like direction of the Spirit when it is in fact just an emotional moment. As members of the priesthood we are not isolated from the influences of mind, body and spirit that anyone else may be subject to.

Preparing a sermon is not an exact science so here are some general rules of thumb to consider:

1. Scriptures are the foundation upon which sermons are built.
2. Long readings of scripture may be suitable for the subject but they can also dull the audience. Choose passages that are rightly sized and relevant for the subject being discussed. It is worth noting that reading for yourself tends to be much faster than reading aloud so a long passage may be quick for you to read to yourself, but it may take 2x to 5x longer to read to an audience. The audience may find it difficult to piece together different verses as easily as you can since you have the text in front of you. If you find yourself wanting to emphasize some verses make sure it is readily understood that you are focusing on them.

3. Having the scriptures marked and ready for presentation saves time and attention when standing in front of your audience. Thumbing or sorting through scriptures or a stack of papers is distracting and may divert attention from the message.
4. Using scriptures in context is important, even vital, to the correctness of their use. Out-of-context verses are used to support many false theologies, prophetic understandings or simply false doctrine. What is context?
 - a. Context provides a background so the originally intended way a passage is used by the original speaker/writer/author can be conveyed. Context defines the meaning of a passage as much as the individual components of the passage. When something is out of context it results in drawing the incorrect conclusion. Consider the following:

i. Out-of-Context:

Then the devil came unto him and said, If thou be the Son of God, cast thyself down; for it is written, He shall give his angels charge concerning thee, and in their hands they shall bear thee up, lest at any time thou dash thy foot against a stone.

- *Matthew 4:6*

Conclusion: The Lord will bear you up and you will never even be injured.

ii. In-Context:

Then the devil came unto him and said, If thou be the Son of God, cast thyself down; for it is written, He shall give his angels charge concerning thee, and in their hands they shall bear thee up, lest at any time thou dash thy foot against a stone.

Jesus said unto him, It is written again, Thou shalt not tempt the Lord, thy God.

- *Matthew 4:6-7*

Conclusion: The Lord will bear you up through trials but do not take unnecessary or ill-advised risks contrary to the will of God.

- b. Mis-using context both destroys the original intent of the passage and leads to significant errors in understanding the scriptures. Losing context has led to churches making radical changes to theology, doctrine and even ordinances.

5. Your subject should be interesting and meaningful from the standpoint of understanding or learning the Gospel or the doctrine of Christ. This is important in the sense that you are not being asked to serve as a dictionary or as a teller of stories. The purpose of the sermon is to persuade the audience towards a better faith, not to show that you have a lot of testimonies (though testimonies may supplement your primary message,) or minutiae that are not of any significant importance. This may be a subjective instead of objective measure – meaning that you may be biased because of personal preferences instead of solid doctrinal or scriptural reasons – but whether something is “interesting” is directly tied to the ability of the audience to pay attention.
6. Sidebar stories or discussions are sometimes useful, but they should relate to the main message in a way the audience can understand.
7. Do not be afraid of difficult subjects but remember that not all subjects are suited for all audiences. It is one thing to preach repentance, but to focus on adultery or murder (for example) – unless God gives you that message to preach – may alienate you from the audience without justifiable reason.
8. Humor is best applied in the thinnest coat possible if at all. Laughter may have the result of injuring those who have faced real trials or that are in a more sensitive personal state, particularly if they have come seeking healing and guidance; or it may diminish the value of what you are intending to present. Humor improperly used may make the speaker look like an entertainer instead of a representative of Jesus Christ. Use only with extreme care.
9. Unless it is a scriptural quote, vulgarity and profanity are never to be used in any sermon – not even when referencing what someone else has said.
10. While personal experiences and testimonies are important and useful remember that the sermon is not about you.

Structuring your notes

Unless you are in the small minority, you will probably prepare some notes for your sermon. This can be done in many ways, and it is not by any means a requirement for you to follow these suggestions. That being said, let's begin.

Poorly laid out sermon notes often fall into one or more of three categories:

1. Obscure
2. Disordered
3. Overly detailed

Obscure notes are those that may just reference a name, event, or thought about which you may not be able to call to memory very easily in context while speaking.

The Fix: Instead of single words or incomplete phrases write out the entire meaning of what you intended to reference.

Disordered notes are just that – thoughts that are not linked together in a particular or useful sequence. The pulpit is not the place to sort out which came first.

The Fix: If you have initially written notes that are disordered consider it a first draft. Use the second draft as a means to put these notes into a comprehensible order. Remember that if you don't know what you are trying to convey your audience won't know either.

Overly detailed notes may include far more information than what you need to convey during your sermon. They may include a great deal of minutiae that you do not intend to bring up in the sermon. In either case, you don't want to spend your time at the pulpit trying to filter through the bulk of information you have collected to find the thing that you wanted to use.

The Fix: Run through your notes a second time and either highlight or copy out the details that are most relevant to your sermon without compromising the message or the integrity of the message.

Suggestions for making better sermon notes

Unless or until your experience in speaking is enough for you to present a sermon without notes you may consider these ideas as a framework that you can build upon.

Instead of a fully written-out sermon consider using an outline.

When you are in front and speaking you will want to keep as much eye-contact with the audience as possible. This shows them that you are speaking **to** them instead of **at** them. But this is very difficult to do if you are reading the entire sermon word for word. An outline is a way to organize your thoughts in sequential order from topic to topic with references as needed, without fully writing out the entire message. A quick glance at an outline can show you step-by-step what you intended to cover while giving you the chance to interact with your audience in a way that keeps their attention better than a droning reading of a message.

You may have concerns that if you don't have the message fully written out you may not know what to say. That can happen. However, you cannot improve if you never take the step. Giving sermons is a skill that improves over time if you exercise that skill. You may have to think on your feet a little more but your preparations can make that process much better.

There is no absolute rule about how you use an outline. No two individuals are likely to use the same nomenclature (system of rules and notations) so you really are free to explore this in whatever way works best for you. It could consist of a simple list of topics or it could be more structured; the content and how you use it is subject to how you think and work.

Example

Scripture reading: John 3:16

How is Jesus able to do this work?

- Isaiah's writing about the birth of Jesus (Isaiah 9:6)
- Isaiah' writing about the crucifixion (Isaiah 53:3-12)

Why did Jesus do this work?

- Purpose of God is to bring about the immortality and eternal life of man
- Book of Mormon explains it had to be an infinite and eternal sacrifice, so it could not be just anyone to do it

Who did Jesus do this work for?

- "God so loved the world that..."
- Personal testimony about how God showed this love to me

Challenge the congregation to remember how important the sacrifice of Jesus is, and to remember the importance of faithfulness to the end.

As you can see from this very brief and simple example there are different ways to do the same essential thing. This is a topical outline which could be used as a reminder more than a detailed analysis of the subjects to be discussed. It should be clear from the lack of detail in this example that it might be more suited for someone who feels more free to elaborate upon the subjects without a great deal of note references.

Time

While the congregation or presiding officer may have an explicit time window during which they expect your sermon to last there are just two primary things which should govern the length of your sermon: attention and coverage. A sermon that lasts too long can easily lose the interest of the audience because of their attention span. A sermon that is too short may leave the audience disappointed that they came prepared for something nourishing only to be cut short.

The second factor – coverage – is easily more important than the first. Your sermon should be long enough to cover the message that you are trying to bring without making it difficult to follow. These two factors work together to make sermons useful for the purpose that sermons are designed to fulfill: persuading the audience to follow Jesus Christ.

Presentation

Speaking in public is admittedly quite different than having personal conversations with individuals. When having a personal conversation there are certain mannerisms and speaking methods that are more natural and more easily used because this is a direct, one-on-one interaction with just a few people. Public speaking, however, has some different general principles than a private conversation does.

Speaking clearly, enunciating words and speaking at a somewhat more deliberate pace makes the audience more comfortable with understanding and considering what your sermon is about. Rapid speech is harder to follow and not enunciating words makes it difficult to understand the content of what you are saying. Inexperienced speakers often try to get the words out as soon as they may be formed in the mind so that they are not forgotten; this should be avoided if possible. You cannot persuade an audience if they are left wondering what you said. Consider slowing your speech to about 3/4 to 2/3 of the pace your normal conversational speech would be. Remember that not only may people in the

audience have difficulty hearing but they may also not be accustomed to your primary language – particularly if you have visitors that are from another region.

In terms of regional dialects or language differences it might be worth considering keeping the use of idiomatic expressions to a minimum. An idiomatic expression is a word or phrase that people in the local area might be familiar with as meaning one thing, but to an outsider it might have an entirely different meaning which could lead to confusion, anger or frustration. If you are speaking in a region that is different than the one which you are familiar with, you should be careful to use language that is not easily mistaken to mean something other than your intended message. These cultural language divisions may be difficult to avoid but it is worth the effort if by some means some soul repents and is baptized because they understood you.

In terms of the actual speaking process, it is not unusual for new speakers (and even some more experienced ones) to insert filler words such as “and,” “ah,” “uh,” “um,” “you know,” and so forth. Most people are not aware that they are doing it, but it can nevertheless be distracting, which may lead members of your audience to believe that you are struggling to understand what you are talking about. The first step to correcting this problem is to accept the idea that you may be doing it. If you are positively certain that you are not doing this, you may want to skip the next few paragraphs which discuss how to address this problem.

Using filler words is often the way your mind bridges the gaps between sentences as you are constructing ideas and assembling them into words to convey to your audience. This is one of the reasons that preparing for a sermon is particularly useful: if you have already developed the ideas and are confident in the message, it becomes much easier to construct the sentences to speak in your mind so that you can relay that information through your mouth. Habits like using filler words are sometimes very hard to break. One way to correct this is the following:

If you have the opportunity and you have willing friends or family, videotape or record yourself giving a 5-or-10 minute presentation on a subject – it doesn’t particularly matter what subject – as if you were giving a sermon. With your family or friends present watch or listen to the recording of your presentation and count the number of filler words that you used. You may be very surprised – even embarrassed – at the result. This can serve as an antidote to cure you from using filler words when you realize how much you have depended upon them to “fill up the space” with words.

One of the reasons people use filler words during public speaking is because they do not want to leave a silence gap in their speech or sermon. Silence can be perfectly acceptable if it is not too frequent or too long because your audience can lose interest or the confidence that you know what you are speaking about. If you

pace your speech, you may not need to have gaps of silence or to use any filler words. Filler words give **you** comfort – not your audience. In the end you will feel better about speaking if you pace yourself and do not rely on filler words.

Intonation and volume

The authors are very sure that the reader has witnessed speeches or sermons in which the speaker is very animated and loud or conversely, inanimate (motionless) and quiet. Good speakers fall somewhere in-between those extremes. Loud and highly animated speakers can be frightening to some in the audience, which may work at odds with the message they are seeking to deliver. Speakers that are excessively quiet and unmoving may fail to keep the attention of some audience members.

When speaking it is often a good practice to vary both the pitch and volume of your voice to keep the audience from being lulled to sleep. Your words may be perfect and exactly the right thing to say, but if delivered flatly and without any notable variation in pitch or volume it may go unheard. That is not to say that you should do this wildly from a whisper to a yell or from a bass tone to a soprano tone. Just remember you might lose the opportunity to reach someone if they are bored not with the words you are speaking, but with the voice giving the words.

The difficulty with making your voice interesting to listen to is that you do not often hear yourself from the perspective of someone else. When you speak you usually hear your voice differently than others do because of the physiology of hearing and of speech. Your voice will resonate more in your own ears than it will for others, and you will notice the nuances of your vocal inflections more than others will for the same reason. There is no single piece of advice that will train you to do this perfectly except to be aware of how you hear yourself and how others hear you. Be observant of your audience while speaking.

If you are really interested in seeing how your voice sounds to others, record yourself while speaking and listen to the recording. Most people do not like to hear recordings of themselves because the recording does not convey the senses you have of your voice when you speak, but the recording will be faithful to the way that others do hear you. It may be useful to do this so you can adjust accordingly: be aware that it is not easy to undo the speaking mannerisms that you have developed over the course of your lifetime. This is another area in which practice, honesty, and the humility to change where needed will help you more than all the detailed instructions of an experienced speaker.

When giving a public sermon remember the basics of the Gospel of Christ. Your absolute focus on presenting the Gospel will be the measure against which

your sermon will be judged. In terms of your speaking style and how you address your audience, here are a few tips:

1. Do not speak down to your audience. This is insulting and will not help convert anyone.
2. Do not try to impress your audience. If you try to impress your audience with complicated words or ideas, you will either confuse them or humiliate yourself.
3. Do not ask questions that you cannot answer. If you cannot answer your own question, you may discredit your own sermon.
4. Speak assertively but with humility. Preaching a sermon authoritatively is part of what gives assurance to the validity of the message. Conversely, an aggressive speaker can discourage audience members from being willing to listen.
5. Observe your audience and make eye contact where possible. This can personalize the sermon in ways that an inattentive speaker cannot. Be sure not to fixate on one person, though, as this can be upsetting or disturbing for a number of reasons unrelated to your sermon.

Besides words and the motion of your body there are sometimes useful means to help bring an audience to understand in more personal, profound, or simpler terms what you are attempting to get across to them. Sometimes good speakers will use physical objects to illustrate their point or to bring clarity to something that simple words may not (see the section below titled "*A little theory for the mind*"). Hammers and nails, yarn, mirrors, etc., each of these are examples of things that have served a useful purpose in sermons. This is not a substitute for an explanation, but they can serve as a supplement for people that need some additional insight. In other words, if what you are covering is not familiar to your audience a visual aid might be helpful. You should use these as a supplement only. Different members of your audience may get a different sense of it than you might have intended, so be careful in how or what you may use. Never use idols though and take great care with the use of items known to be symbols.

As a general principle and rule of thumb remember that sermons are best grounded in the scriptures, supplemented by testimony, expressed with reasoning and concluded with a devotional challenge.

A little theory for the mind

Knowing a few truths about how people listen, process and use information can help make your sermon more effective in conveying the Gospel of Christ to your

listeners. This section is intended to provide you with some background knowledge about how people learn, which is useful both for preaching sermons and for teaching classes, as well as just interacting with people in general. Let's begin.

Most people can listen and understand ideas on a sliding scale that ranges from what may be considered Concrete Structuralism to Abstract Reasoning. The terms themselves are not as important as what they mean, but what they mean is directly tied to the approach people take in educating themselves or how they approach problem solving.

Concrete Structuralism is a term to describe how people use real, physical examples of some idea or practice in order to understand it. For example, let's say you need to teach someone how to bake a cake. Some people need to get their hands on the eggs, flour, etc., and perform the baking steps to grasp the principles of how to bake a particular kind of cake.

Abstract Reasoning is a term to describe how people can relate to and understand something conceptually instead of physically. To use the earlier example, someone who learns by abstract reasoning may be taught how to bake a cake by reading the recipe and the instructions without touching the ingredients or performing the steps. Given the need to bake a cake, they would be comfortable doing so.

Do not confuse these two types of thinking as an indication that one is more intelligent than the other. These may differ in how thinking is done but one is not inherently better than the other. These are learning methods as much as thinking methods. Most people fall somewhere between the two endpoints in that spectrum of thinking, like this:

Concrete Structuralism ◀----- (Most People) -----▶ Abstract Reasoning

Not only is there a spectrum of different combinations of these two kinds of thinking or learning but different "scales" depending on which subject is being taught or presented. A musician may be able to read musical notation and understand exactly how it would sound if the music were played (a form of Abstract Reasoning) but they may need a much more hands-on method of teaching when learning how to assemble a cabinet. For any given individual some subjects may require more-or-less of either kind of teaching.

When you preach or teach be aware that your audience may consist of people whose learning or thinking falls across this entire spectrum of learning types. The lesson to be learned from this is that you may well consider the range of possible ways to address the different ways that people learn. Ultimately it is the

responsibility of the hearer to apply themselves, but you can make the process easier or harder depending on how you address the audience.

If you do use a physical object to help describe an idea, it can help some in your audience to understand what you are discussing, but it is not always necessary to do so. Some that fall on the abstract reasoning end of the spectrum may learn from just the spoken word, but not all do. Do what you need to do so that you might help some or all. Some successful speakers implement a range of methods so that all may gain something.

And unto the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might gain the Jews; to them that are under the law, as under the law, that I might gain them that are under the law;

To them that are without law, as without law (being not without law to God, but under the law to Christ), that I might gain them that are without law.

To the weak became I as weak, that I might gain the weak; I am made all things to all men, that I might by all means save some.

And this I do for the gospel's sake, that I might be partaker thereof with you.

- 1 Corinthians 9:20-23

Practice

Ultimately the only way to become better in preaching sermons is to do it; keep in mind that if you do something and never learn from it you will not improve. Talented speakers must have the humility to accept helpful criticism or helpful suggestions. However, there is a difference between criticism and helpful criticism.

When preaching a sermon there are generally four forces that will impact how you discover which things worked and which things didn't work in how your presentation was received.

1. You

You yourself are not immune to your own strengths or weaknesses. Personal pride, personal humility, character and expectations all combine to color how you see your presentation – your sermon.

Pride has no place in the learning process. This is sometimes a very difficult thing to understand especially if you believe that your cause is just and that your process is proven.

Personal humility in this case is the ability to accept that your perceptions may or may not be accurate. For most people there is room for improvement. If you believe that the audience didn't receive the sermon

as you expected them to because they just aren't qualified then you are the one with the problem. It is your job – your mission – to reach out to them instead of expecting them to reach out to you.

Your character is something the Gospel of Christ deals with directly. No one likes to be treated like a reprobate. But you also cannot be permissive of sin. When you preach a sermon, it is your character that is remembered as much as what you say, if not more.

The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me because the Lord hath anointed me to preach good tidings unto the meek; he hath sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound;

- Isaiah 6:1

I will seek that which was lost, and bring again that which was driven away, and will bind up that which was broken, and will strengthen that which was sick; but I will destroy the fat and the strong; I will feed them with judgment.

- Ezekiel 34:16

What you expect to result from your sermon may also color how you learn from the results.

If you have the expectation that with one sermon you will completely transform the audience, you will invariably draw the wrong conclusion about what works and what does not. If you expect no results, you may not be open to learning anything either. Your attitude towards preaching is the key ingredient to understanding what was good or bad; not just the quantitative elements of the sermon's content but how you presented it. Try to be realistic and fair to yourself knowing that even Jesus did not convert everyone.

2. God

What shall we then say to these things? If God be for us, who can be against us?

- Romans 8:31

What may be most comforting in the ministry is that you have an advocate that is deeply interested in how you perform your ministry and will give you help. The Lord God is there to help you because He is the

one that has enlisted you in the work. However, don't expect a thank-you note:

Doth he thank that servant because he doeth the things which were commanded him? I say unto you, Nay.

- *Luke 17:9*

God wants you to be successful in bringing souls to an understanding of the Gospel otherwise there is no purpose for the ministry. If you want to improve the effectiveness of your preaching or other ministerial duties, pray, study and work diligently to follow the teachings of Christ.

3. Satan

There are some who say that we are our own worst enemy; this is only partly true. Satan has his own vested interest in destroying the work of God, including you. If he can destroy your work by giving you bad advice and making you doubt your role as a priesthood member, or succumbing to the pressures of opinion and criticism, he will.

And he showed me Joshua, the high priest, standing before the angel of the Lord, and Satan standing at his right hand to resist him.

- *Zechariah 3:1*

There is wisdom in listening to advice from others while weighing it against the facts. What one person sees as a great sermon may be seen as a terrible or boring sermon by another. Not all sermons serve everyone. It is important to realize that sometimes the criticism of a sermon comes because it has hit the nail on the head.

For we have found this man a pestilent fellow, and a mover of sedition among all the Jews throughout the world, and a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes,

- *Acts 24:5*

It is in Satan's interest to draw you down and make you ineffectual. In that regard when you evaluate your performance in preaching a sermon be mindful that Satan wants you to fail. How you evaluate your sermon after-the-fact may be the greatest trial you face leading to your future

service. Remember the Gospel of Christ and your priesthood calling to temper such thoughts and doubts.

4. The audience

Your audience is the point of giving the sermon but not the subject of it. It is they to whom you are seeking to minister. Not everyone in the hearing of your voice has the same tastes in presenters – preachers – or are ready to receive what you have to say; some are. Usually there is a mixture and not all will tell you what you think you need to know about how the sermon was received. That is ok. If we as priesthood tailor sermons to only please our hearers we are mistaken about the role of priesthood.

Sometimes sermons have to be “uncomfortable” for the exact reason of preaching repentance. Other times sermons need to build up and bring comfort to the weak or the broken-hearted. The point of preaching is not to participate in a popularity contest or to just excoriate (deride) your listeners. It is to promote the kingdom of God through the Gospel of Christ. Keep these things in mind when or if you get feedback from your audience after the sermon.

Review

Preaching sermons is one of the more public responsibilities placed upon members of the priesthood – serving an important function in the ministry. Effective sermons can be preached by anyone. Most sermons can be improved upon through careful attention to preparation, presentation and examination after-the-fact.

If you want to present the best sermons that you can, evaluate how you go through the steps listed earlier: learn from what works and learn from what doesn't work. You are not alone in this endeavor – you may have other priesthood members or church members whom you can trust to provide unbiased advice. Remember that unbiased advice is sometimes harder to recognize than you realize. Judge the merits and be as Nathanael –

Jesus saw Nathanael coming unto him and said of him, Behold an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile!

- *John 1:47*

Even the esteemed brother of Nephi, Jacob, approached sermons very carefully,

Wherefore, I, Jacob, gave unto them these words as I taught them in the temple, having firstly obtained mine errand from the Lord.

- *Jacob 1:17*

Preparing for a sermon is a serious matter, not to be taken lightly. While Jesus did speak to the disciples to say that they should not worry about what to speak he particularly addressed what they should say if they are brought to defend themselves in trial. This is the oft-misconstrued meaning of Jesus' commandment:

But when they deliver you up, take no thought how or what ye shall speak; for it shall be given you in that same hour what ye shall speak; for it is not ye that speak, but the Spirit of your Father which speaketh in you.

- *Matthew 10:17*

Unless one expects every sermon to be a trial before officers of the court, what Jesus meant when He told the disciples, “*take no thought how or what ye shall speak*” it was not to suggest that when they give a sermon they should not be prepared in some fashion. Preparation is necessary whether it is by prayer and study or by preparing notes.

As not all have the same gifts as the apostles, preparing notes for a sermon can help to guide your presentation of the sermon so that it can be more effective. Generally speaking, notes should be just that – notes; not a fully written oral speech. Use these notes to guide your speaking. Use good eye contact with your audience; speak so that you can be easily understood; use appropriate language and cover the subject without being too brief or too lengthy. Persuade your listeners to obey the Gospel of Christ. Do not expect all to heed the advice but exercise caution when hearing feedback.

Last, but certainly not least, don't preach a hypocritical sermon. If you preach a sermon against something which you yourself currently participate in, it is not very likely that your listeners are going to be convinced to cease doing the same thing. If this is something to be repented of in terms of violating commandments, you should heed the Gospel advice and repent yourself before advising others to do the same.

And why beholdest thou the mote which is in thy brother's eye, but perceivest not the beam which is in thine own eye?

Again, how canst thou say to thy brother, Let me pull out the mote that is in thine eye, when thou thyself beholdest not the beam which is in thine own eye? Thou hypocrite! Cast out first the beam from thine own eye, and then shalt thou see clearly to pull out the mote which is in thy brother's eye.

- Luke 6:41-42

Preaching sermons is something God has tasked priesthood to do for thousands of years. The mission has not changed. When God wants us to preach a sermon it is our responsibility to stand up to the task and proclaim as Isaiah did,

Also, I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, Whom shall I send, and who will go for us? Then said I, Here am I; send me.

- Isaiah 6:8

Last notes

In the previous section we discussed general aspects of preparing and giving sermons. In this section we would like to discuss the actual content of your sermon. Far be it from us to place limits on how the Spirit of the Lord may inspire you. When viewing our role as priesthood and remembering the Lord's commandments to us, it is well to consider the details of what you intend to present.

The scriptures are filled with examples of good sermons, but they do not record even a small fraction of all the sermons that have ever been given. We act in faith when we are called to preach a sermon. One of the more biasing aspects of the scriptures is that the sermons were often given by prophets or by the apostles who knew Jesus from their experience with him in and around Jerusalem or by the disciples who recorded their testimonies in the Book of Mormon, etc. While we might prefer that all of us in the priesthood should give sermons delivered by the Spirit in the same way as the prophets, apostles and disciples did, many of us struggle when getting started. If this is how you feel you are in a large company of others who have felt the same way.

The phrase, "The Lord works in mysterious ways" is sometimes the best way to describe how you develop the content of your sermons. Sometimes the content of the message you are to deliver is very clear in your mind – which can be very confidence-building. However, we often feel like the Syrophoenecian woman:

But Jesus said unto her, Let the children of the kingdom first be filled; for it is not meet to take the children's bread and to cast it unto the dogs.

And she answered and said unto him, Yes, Lord, thou sayest truly; yet the dogs under the table eat of the children's crumbs.

And he said unto her, For this saying, go thy way; the devil is gone out of thy daughter.

- Mark 7:26-28

Sometimes we long for the crumbs from the table that the prophets and apostles fed from when preparing for sermons. Even so there is something wondrous about how God works if you are willing. When preparing for sermons and giving them, Satan will try to distract you by sending you on erroneous paths of study and generally make you feel uncomfortable in the time leading up to when you speak. After your sermon he is not done with you. He may cast doubts in your mind, give you reasons to suspect that you didn't serve God well and cause you to feel that your sermon was a disaster that only a devil could love. All such feelings are not constructive criticisms so discard them; they are not of God.

Everyone, except Jesus Himself, has room for improvement. Feelings of inadequacy for the task are not tools Jesus sends to equip you. There is a difference between humility and accepting a beating of criticism.

One of the miracles Jesus uses is what might seem to yourself or others to be very uninspiring words and then transform someone's life with them. This happens a lot. You may not have felt very inspired while giving the sermon. Nevertheless, someone in your audience might just be transformed by it. Put forth your best efforts and let God do his work.

Not all sermons are effective upon everyone, either. Remember, O remember: **Abinidi's last sermon only converted Alma.**

As you develop and deliver your sermons, take a moment to mark some items as off-limits as a general rule and remind yourself periodically if you find yourself wanting to do them. These are subjects or things that you should avoid in your sermons, not because we personally want to dictate the things that you might use in sermons, but because these items are simply bad ideas and bad practices:

1. Speculation

Sermons that speculate about the interpretation of a particular prophecy or revelation may generate excitement. People will remember if your speculation was incorrect. It is best to keep such speculation to yourself and to focus on the primary goal of preaching.

2. Using audience members as examples of what not to do.

Jesus did this in regard to the Pharisees and Sadducees, but He also had a perfect knowledge of everything they did or didn't do. If you don't have a perfect knowledge, such as Jesus did, then you probably shouldn't call out audience members as bad examples. Even if you do have this perfect knowledge, consider this to be fair warning about how this will affect your sermon in bringing people to a knowledge of Jesus and the need to obey His Gospel.

3. Imitating other preachers

While this might sound obvious there is a very high chance that imitating another preacher's preaching style will fall completely flat for you. We present here guidelines and not exact styles. No two people preach in the same way even if they have very similar personalities. God called you to the priesthood to serve. God did not call you to imitate other minister's preaching style or mannerisms.

4. Using other priesthood member's sermons

There are a number of reasons why this is an especially bad idea. Among them is the potential that an audience member might recognize you have not spoken according to your own preparations. This is still considered plagiarism even if it is for the highest ideals.

5. Apologizing in advance for the sermon, its content or yourself as a speaker.

When you do this, you prepare the minds of your audience with the idea that they do not need to listen to you. This might be simple humility on your part but the audience may also see this as false humility. What you may see as an admission of humility or weakness on your part may translate into something very much undesirable on the part of your listeners. It is also a fast way to get your audience to ignore anything you say.

6. Exercising the "gifts of the Spirit" carelessly.

While the gifts of the Spirit are wonderful when accompanied by the Spirit they must be understood in their proper context. It is made worse if the gifts you exercise are not from the Spirit of God. Exercise extreme caution. Heed Paul's advice:

*Quench not the Spirit.
Despise not prophesyings.
Prove all things; hold fast that which is good.
Abstain from all appearance of evil.*

- 1 Thessalonians 5:19-22

If it is the will of the Holy Ghost to manifest the gifts of the Spirit don't deny him room. Be sure to get confirmation from another person – presumably/preferably the presiding officer.

Ultimately you have to judge for yourself whether a sermon topic, the sermon content, or how you present it is in keeping with the will of the Lord. At times this can be very intimidating because it is an exceptionally large responsibility. The reality is that the Lord is ultimately responsible for whom He calls to the priesthood, and it is He who equips us to be able to serve Him in this capacity. This is His business – the building up of the Kingdom of God – and because He is the architect of that Kingdom, we must trust Him to know what He is doing.

Classes

General Considerations

It may be trite to suggest that when teaching a class there is something to be said in favor of knowing what you are talking about. Admittedly not everyone in the priesthood is equally equipped with the same knowledge or understanding of the scriptures, yet these two qualities are generally expected by a class being taught by you. But while these two qualities – knowledge and understanding of the scriptures – are very important, they are not the only things that make your ability to teach a class worthwhile to the class students. Knowledge comes from study, understanding comes from contemplation and study.

The ability to be a good teacher depends upon how you conduct yourself, how you interact with the students, how you answer questions, how you present facts and how you manage the classroom. A good teacher will take advantage of the opportunity to make information interesting to the class, show how it is applicable to them and get the students in the class to participate.

Besides presenting information and answering questions, etc., sometimes managing the classroom is one of the most difficult parts of teaching. What is meant by managing the classroom? Here are some general things to consider regarding teaching:

1. The class typically consists of a few people who are more eager to answer questions than others. While admirable in its own way this can often prevent others from participating that are in greater need to learn in the class. This must be managed in a kind, loving and firm manner.
2. The class may include individuals that “grandstand” more than others by either more lengthy expositions, explorations, or speculations on subjects of interest to them personally. Sometimes this comes from individuals that would prefer to be in front teaching. This must be managed in a kind, loving and firm manner.
3. The classroom environment must not be unduly distracting for the purposes of the class. Noisy talking, people walking around or otherwise disturbing the quietness and focus of the classroom: these issues must be addressed in a kind, loving and firm manner.
4. If you are the assigned teacher for a class remember this authority is being granted to you and there are responsibilities attached to that authority. While this is not a free license to do whatever you want you do have certain liberties in how you conduct the class.

In consideration of these it is important to understand that preparation is essential to properly conduct a class that serves the needs of the class. Perhaps more than preaching sermons, the interactive nature of classes demands a certain degree of flexibility to be able to think on your feet and to understand the perspective of others. While sermons are especially intended to persuade the audience to follow Christ, teaching is an essential part in showing them how to do so thereby “filling in the gaps” of knowledge or understanding that are essential to support their Gospel walk.

Class Types

As discussed in the section on Sermons, the members of your audience are an integral part of how teaching is done. Without the audience – the class – there is no reason for you to teach. Before you start to teach consider what kind of class you are there for. Understanding this will significantly impact how you do this very important task.

There are essentially three kinds of “classes” that you may be called upon to “teach”:

1. Instructor-led classes
2. Topical discussions
3. Open/free-form discussions

Each of these has its own merits that have equally different approaches to how they are conducted. This is something that must be determined before beginning, otherwise you may find yourself struggling with how to determine how to proceed, how to measure the success of the class and how to improve. Classes can be challenging even for experienced teachers.

To discuss each of the three types of classes let’s begin by providing some definitions that will clarify the approach to each one.

Instructor-led classes

This is a traditional class in which the teacher presents information in a sequential manner for the purpose of educating the students. This is designed as a learning environment so that the students gain a knowledge and an understanding of the agreed-upon subject material. Generally speaking, this form of class limits its focus to prepared materials – which can include the scriptures, other books or related materials. Deviations from the primary material are acceptable if they relate to the primary material or provide useful insight that a reasonable person can understand. Prolonged deviations from the primary material should be restricted and discouraged.

In this kind of class, it is the responsibility of the teacher to present facts. As a result, this can require a significant amount of preparation on the part of the teacher. Incorrect information can often be spotted and called out by the students. Presenting facts that are not verifiably true is also irresponsible. This will be discussed later in the section on preparation.

Instructor-led classes should still encourage audience/student participation with comments and questions. These often lead to significant deviations from

the primary subject material. Those interactions should be monitored closely and managed.

Topical discussions

This is a different form of class in which there may be agreed upon subjects for discussion that may not be formally ordered. This form of class will tend to cover subjects less sequentially than *Instructor-led* classes. Without proper supervision this can easily lead to the *Open/free-form discussions* type of environment which will be discussed later.

The difference between an *Instructor led class* and a *Topical discussions* class is that the teacher in a *Topical discussions* class changes roles slightly towards being a moderator more than a presenter of facts. In this environment the teacher serves to introduce subjects and provide some guidance in how the students/audience members interact with both one another and the instructor who often provides some clarity to subjects that are discussed. Improper management of this type of class has the potential for confusing the students if control of the class is allowed to pass to the students. This also has the potential for making subjects very personal and understandable because the level of interaction can be very informative.

Open/free-form discussions

This type of class has no particular guide by any individual topics or subject material and may range from one subject to another as in a more casual conversation. The teacher in this example may be primarily responsible for suggesting topics with the level of audience participation being greatest. The teacher's role is almost purely that of a group moderator whose purpose is to maintain order and prevent false information from being promoted. As this is centered on a religious subject such discussions should not deviate outside the primary area of that subject despite the casual nature of the discussion group.

Although an *Open/free-form discussion* class may be “fun” for the students it tends to be less informative by its nature. On a sliding scale from “Structured Teaching” to “Social Interaction” this class form tends towards the more “Social Interaction” end of the spectrum. The class serves more to be an environment for students and teacher to interact more for the experience of social interaction than for learning and gaining knowledge. The teacher in this case may not be able to prepare materials for this type of environment.

Overall, *Open/free-form discussions* classes are not particularly conducive to the Gospel cause as it promotes a more random series of conversations than what a reasonable person can follow very easily. They also tend to be less memorable as little information of a factual nature is presented for students to

consider. Opinions may differ in that regard, but careful consideration will show this to be true.

General thoughts

Knowing these kinds of class types will significantly impact how the class is conducted by the teacher. In any kind of class there is bound to be an overlap between types depending on the agreed-upon format of the class. It should not be surprising if you find elements of each in any class that you participate in as the teacher or as a student.

When you consider the role of teaching a class remember the Gospel and the commandments of Jesus,

And as ye would that men should do to you, do ye also to them likewise.

- *Luke 6:32 (Luke 6:31 KJV)*

In this context, teach the class that you would want to be in as a student.

Expectations

What makes a class successful? This is a question that you need to consider when you are functioning in the role of a classroom teacher as it will color your perception of how to prepare, conduct and examine the results of a given class. The role of classes in the church differs to a certain degree from that of preaching sermons in that most sermons tend to project a singular message whereas classes are generally for the overall education of students. These are not mutually exclusive goals – they both can lead people to repent of their sins and obey the Gospel of Christ. Whereas Sermons are primarily focused on persuading people to believe the Gospel and obey it, classes tend to help more in understanding various aspects of the religious, historical, doctrinal and scriptural foundations of or insights into the Gospel, Church and Kingdom of Christ in particular. A class that does not have these as its primary foci (central ideas) is probably not one that should be taught in the church of Christ.

Success in teaching a class is often very much more difficult to measure than from Sermons. Not everything that is taught in a class may have a strong outward result that you can observe in the lives of people, yet it is no less important as part of the growth of individuals in their Gospel walk. Many times, a sermon may convince people to obey the gospel of Christ, but without continued sustenance the lambs of the congregation might be overcome if they receive no added help, and this is where classes may be of the greatest benefit.

Perhaps one of the most identifiable “classes” (if it may be called such) takes place in Acts 8, when a eunuch under the command of Queen Candace of Ethiopia was reading in the scriptures and Philip was sent to him. This unnamed eunuch asked Philip a question which Philip then proceeded to answer:

*And Philip ran thither to him, and heard him read the prophet Esaias, and said, Understandest thou what thou readest?
And he said, How can I, except some man should guide me? And he desired Philip that he would come up and sit with him.
- Acts 8:29-30*

Philip then proceeded to “preach” to this eunuch; however, this kind of interaction is a teaching moment and is what helps people in a classroom environment to learn more about Jesus Christ and the gospel of the kingdom of God.

Not all students or audiences are as ready to be taught as others. Setting practical expectations for how a class works should be tempered with the understanding that not all successes are visible, nor are all failures visible. As you gain experience teaching, you will become more adept at “reading” the reactions of students and will be able to adjust accordingly.

Some simple suggestions for learning how your class is progressing can be found in the following ways:

1. Look for eye contact. Students that are not looking up or at the teacher are often losing interest. Lost interest equals lost opportunity.
2. Look for fidgeting. Students that are not interested in the subject material or the manner it is being presented in will often distract themselves with body movements. This can be confused as inattention if the students didn’t get sufficient sleep. Adults fidgeting is often a sign they are not paying attention for a variety of reasons.
3. Not responding to questions. If students are not responding to questions, there may be a few reasons why.
 - a. They may not be interested.
 - b. They may be too shy to respond.
 - c. They may not know the answer.
 - d. They don’t want to prevent someone else from answering.
 - e. They don’t want to answer incorrectly.
 - f. They don’t want to participate in the class.
 - g. They aren’t listening.
4. Students speaking up or asking questions unrelated to the subject material being discussed or presented.

5. Students answering questions or posing questions that are related to the subject material or offering their own insights into the subject material. This can be good if they do not monopolize the class time.
6. Glazed looks – students that are looking at you but are generally unfocused. This can indicate either confusion, or it can indicate that other things are pre-occupying their minds or it could indicate that they are simply out of sorts.

What can be done in these situations? The practical reality is that you cannot expect all students or audience members to react and participate as you would like them to. Some of them may be struggling in their own lives with factors you are not aware of while others may simply have personality traits that either favor or disfavor their interest or participation in a given class or on a given day. The only true failure in teaching a class is if you don't try. Always remember that God has called you and ordained you for this purpose; so, while this should encourage you, it is a calling not to be treated lightly.

Temper your expectations with a dose of humility and reality.

Preparation

It has often been said that teachers learn more when teaching than the students, which the authors of this Guide can attest to as being true more often than not. Whether this comes from learning things from the students, by the extra effort during preparations or from the act of teaching and the insights that come from that process the teacher does often receive a benefit beyond what the average student might. This should be encouraging for those purposing to teach; however, there is a cost associated with teaching that needs to be considered.

The cost of teaching is time and effort preparing for and conducting the class. A teacher in the church should consider his duty seriously and with much prayer as he is an authorized minister of Jesus Christ. While this “cost” may seem at first very prohibitive and fearful to some there is also a joy in doing so that should not be ignored. You are, after all, preparing to teach people about the Lord Jesus Christ and how his love has been extended to each of us. The Spirit of God will, at times, feel very close to you while you prepare for and while you teach classes.

What does preparing to teach a class involve?

For the purposes of discussion let us focus on teaching in the form of the *Instructor-led class* type. The other types discussed previously are inherently more difficult to prepare for because of the potential for shifting discussion topics, though the principles discussed here are also relevant to those types.

There is likely some variability in how preparations are done due to the nature of the agreed-upon subjects for the class. Often this is in the form of either the scriptures themselves or of books written on gospel subjects. When preparing for a class you may do well to include the following:

1. Read the material. If you are not the only person that has been teaching the class, be sure to read the previous material that was covered as well as beyond what you might expect to be able to cover during the class.
2. Take notes. While any teacher can simply read the text to the class, often there are elements of the text that need further examination or clarification in the scriptures, in history books or within the text itself.
3. Prepare some questions for the students to answer. Be careful with this. If you ask questions that you do not have the answer to you may undermine the purpose of the class, namely, to instruct students so they may learn.
 - a. Open-ended questions are a fruitful source of problems that can lead to confusion.
 - b. If you don't feel comfortable with being able to answer the question yourself, look it up in the scriptures or in other good books to find the answer. If you can't find the answer, then don't ask the question.
 - c. Avoid pointless or trivial questions as these will have a negative effect upon the class.
 - d. Don't ask questions that aren't relevant.
4. In some cases, it is especially helpful to prepare PowerPoint, photos, videos or other media to supplement (not replace) the material being discussed. There will be more discussion about this later in terms of presenting the material.
5. Identify the context – whether historical, literary or otherwise – of the material that is being covered. This might include, for example, other events transpiring around the world at the time, practical lifestyle/human involvement in language, culture or technology or the correlation between one event and another in the proceedings of the text and so forth. Context helps to define the meaning of events whether scripturally or spiritually and can provide insights that make it more meaningful to the students.

There should be some caution involved in preparing materials for a class. Not all things are appropriate for all audiences. Be mindful of children, women, older people and people of other cultures or nationalities as they may be offended by or may not be prepared to hear things that you might say. Also remember those that may not have English (or if you are in a country in which the primary language is not familiar to you) as their first language. If

you are not able to communicate well with your audience, you really can't expect to teach them. In those cases, be sure to have a translator available if possible.

If you are using a projector, screen or other electronic or mechanical aids during the class, be sure to test them prior to the class to confirm they are functioning and that you know how to use them. If you spend too much time trying to get something to work that you are not familiar with or that doesn't work, you risk invalidating some of your preparations in addition to taking time away from the opportunity to teach someone about Jesus Christ.

If you have hand-out materials to provide to the class, be sure they are relevant, organized and that you have enough for all of the people expected to attend. It is better to have extras than not enough. Be careful about the use of copyrighted materials. Poofreading can make a difference (i.e., "Proofreading can make a difference") in how the material is received.

It is certain that you cannot prepare for every possible question, topic, or circumstance but you can begin this task as prepared as you can be. Don't forget to pray for guidance, wisdom and knowledge in the performance of the task before you. God wants this to work and will bless you if you are willing to let him.

Presentation

As with the topic "Sermons" discussed earlier, many of the same presentation principles apply to teaching classes. The difference here is that classes tend to involve much more interaction between the students and the teacher. Depending on circumstances such as whether this is part of an ongoing, regular class or a one-time class or short series, you may set different rules according to your preference and the need to cover material quickly. In the case of one-time classes or a short series of classes, you may want to defer questions and answers to the end of the class session in the interest of covering everything within the time limits of the class. Or, if that is not the case, you may encourage questions through the class period so that the audience members may get to participate more with questions that are more interesting to them, but that still relate to the subject being discussed.

The act of teaching

The physicality – the way you are physically involved in the act – of how you teach can be nearly as important as what you teach. It can either lull your class to sleep or keep them interested. Time and experience have shown that it does. A teacher needs to be seen by the students if possible. Shy individuals who teach may

find themselves inadvertently hiding behind a desk or podium without realizing they are doing so.

Teaching is an active process that tells your students the subject is interesting if they see the teacher is interested in the subject enough to be mildly animated about it. By “mildly” it should be understood that the person is not frozen still while they talk. Arms and hands should move to a degree giving the students a sense that the teacher feels free or comfortable in talking about the subject. When a teacher clasps his hands or keeps them in pockets or behind his back the student will tend to get the sense that the teacher is either hiding something or is uncomfortable teaching. This is body language, and it affects the perception of students in subtle ways such as described above.

“Mildly” is preferred to “wildly” – with “wildly” referring to a teacher who flails his arms or legs about in rapid large motions while speaking. This can cause a loss of confidence in the teacher and make the students uncomfortable.

In some regions or cultures pointing fingers at people can be considered rude or uncouth. This should generally be avoided.

There are some general body language elements you may not be familiar with that are important for a healthy relationship between teachers and students. Generally, teachers should not turn their backs to the students – in the literal sense. If a teacher is facing away from the students there are several things that may be impacted:

1. It may be more difficult to hear the teacher when they are facing away.
2. Some people may be able to read lips if they have poor hearing and the only way is for them to see the face of the teacher.
3. Facing the students is a subtle way to show that you are not being rude and that you are actively interacting with them.
4. If you have a blackboard or whiteboard and need to erase something, do not sway your body side-to-side while using the eraser, which is the natural tendency due to the pressure being applied on the board and the exertion of moving your arm. This may seem like a silly precaution, but audience members may see this act very differently than you do. You can avoid this by erasing with vertical motions, or generally by just using your arm and holding your body steady.
5. If you must write on a board or large sheet of paper such as poster board, do so by facing the audience as much as possible. Some teachers tend to talk while writing – which is not a problem in itself – but if they turn away from the students while doing so it has the same problems mentioned in 2 and 3 above. If you must turn away in order to write do

not talk while writing but resume speaking once you have turned to face the audience again.

6. Teachers who are nervous may sometimes use a fidgeting tactic for themselves to relieve the stress they feel over being in front of a group of people or of teaching in particular. In most cases, they do this without being aware of it. This is something to be conscious of, though, as it portrays nervousness to the class and can detract from the process of teaching. Clicking pens open and closed, manipulating keys or coins in your pocket, moving papers around in front of you without needing to, swaying back and forth from foot to foot or any host of other minor movements that can be distracting and serve to give you a sense of comfort (albeit a false sense of comfort), should be avoided. This is different than being “mildly animated” as these fidgeting movements are unintentional movements. The best advice to combat this is to be aware of yourself while you teach.
7. Avoid the use of filler words as described in the section on “Sermons.” The same reasons apply here.

Use of multimedia or handouts

It has been shown true in the field of education that students benefit substantially from receiving information in more than one format. Using multiple methods to display or present information can improve the ability of students to assimilate that information into their minds. This includes printed text, projection screens, video, audio, or other means including physical objects. While these are not practical in all situations this can be a useful tool when the circumstances allow. The caveat is that with additional tools there may be additional time needed to prepare them.

One useful tool that has become quite popular because of its format is Microsoft PowerPoint. This is an electronic slide-based means for including text, video, photos, or audio as part of a presentation. While it is a very powerful tool it can be misused just as easily as being used correctly.

From the standpoint of information content teachers are tempted to place as much detailed content into a PowerPoint frame as they can, not realizing that this is the wrong use for PowerPoint. PowerPoint is useful for providing information in a graphical form, but it should be used in the way that it is most designed for. There are a couple of reasons for this.

1. Teachers are often tempted to simply place a lot of text on the slide. Depending on the amount of text, the size of the text, the distance of the audience from the screen, the size of the screen and the number of people in both the front and back of the audience, many people likely will not be

able to read the text on the slide. That destroys the purpose of using PowerPoint. Any students in the audience that either can't read or read poorly may be left out.

2. A lot of graphical elements on the screen that point to one another may be accurate but indecipherable to audience members that have poor vision or are not aware of the meaning of various symbols.

PowerPoint is generally good at being used for showing a comparison between a few things like a few words or phrases or showing information like pie charts, bar graphs, photos, etc. This is most impactful when it is very easy to understand to a reasonable person, quickly conveys that message and supports what is being taught.

While using PowerPoint in the classroom many teachers fall into the habit of reading the text that is on the current PowerPoint slide to the audience. That is not the reason for using PowerPoint. The slides should only be used in **support** of the subject material and not as the subject matter **itself**. PowerPoint should be used as something for students to review while the teacher is speaking. In doing so, students do not feel insulted that the teacher feels the need to read something they themselves can read. PowerPoint should bolster the subject content with **metadata**, which is information about your subject content. Many people read faster to themselves than the teacher can speak, which can lead to frustration.

It is estimated that people typically speak at the rate of about 183 words-per-minute while most people typically read (non-orally) at as much as 300 words-per-minute (see reference below) with fast readers exceeding 700 words-per-minute (see 2nd reference below). Between the 183 and 300 words-per-minute rates, following a teacher reading orally while students read to themselves non-orally can cause a disparity in rate that gets filled with distractions and other unrelated thoughts. A teacher should cover subject material and **reference** the PowerPoint to illustrate the point, while students can read the text and absorb what the teacher is saying.

<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0749596X19300786#:~:text=The%20average%20oral%20reading%20rate,of%20reading%2Dspecific%20language%20processing>.

<https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/how-fast-considered-speed-reading-quick-facts-paul-nowak/>

If presenting reference material is used, be sure to notate the source so that students can look up the references. This also avoids plagiarism issues.

The use of multimedia content and handouts is to provide a secondary or supplement source of information that affirms, clarifies or provides additional information not found within the class material itself.

Starting the class

The best way to start a class is to start it well. This may seem obvious but as you are called to teach in the church of Christ you should start your class with a prayer. As with any service, this seems the most reasonable thing to do. If you are teaching a class that is a continuation of a previous class, it is generally a good idea to both know where the previous class ended and where the current class will begin. If you have prepared for the class, this should be something you have already learned.

Besides knowing where the previous class left off it is often a good idea to review to the class, very briefly, where the previous session left off so that all the audience members can be refreshed and ready to move onto the new class topics. If you wish to provide a brief overview of what will be covered during this class, feel free to do so but keep in mind that even the best preparations can be altered as needed either in scope or content in order to satisfy the needs of the students. It is important to prepare for some variability.

Ending the class

It is important to finish the class well, if possible, on a high point whenever feasible. Be mindful of what time constraints you might have in the group setting you are teaching in. Some groups may be very strict about this while others are very lax, so due respect to the use of their time should be taken into account. And it should be considered polite to thank them for their attention and participation.

Summary

Many of the most key “Do and Don’t” suggestions have already been covered in the previous sections, including the section on “Sermons.” The reader is encouraged to review those items.

It is important to review the things that worked and the things that didn’t work while keeping clear that each audience, each student, is different – often having very different views on things. Personal background, education, occupation, health and age all impact the ability of the individuals present to participate in and to understand the material being covered in the class. The best advice that we can

provide to you is this: assume nothing. Do not assume that the class was a failure or that it was an overwhelming success. Do not assume that your feelings about the class are accurate as your opinion may be colored by your own experiences instead of the reality observed by the students. What makes perfect sense to you may be gibberish to others and what is personally confusing to you may be perfectly clear to someone else. The wisdom we can offer is this: don't give up. Learn from the mistakes and the successes, improve where you can and don't let pride prevent you from getting better at this very important commandment that has been given you – to teach, expound, exhort, and invite all to come unto Christ. Search for the better way and the Lord may teach **you** something that you need to know.

About the Authors

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