

MARTIN ARCHIBALD

The Practice of Public Preaching

A Short Guide



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Introduction

This booklet has been written to provide a basic introduction to the skills of preaching, both to older and to younger audiences. The author's chief qualification is to have listened to decades of addresses, with a growing persuasion that, while to be gifted for this work by the Holy Spirit is vital, there is an essential place for teaching the required skills to those enabled by divine help to put them into practice. There are pitfalls that should be pointed out before unhelpful habits become ingrained past remedy.

The Spirit of God directs a preacher during his preparation and delivery into harmony with His own ministry to those who will hear. He does not do our work for us, and He uses those who are willing to learn from mistakes! The fact that He can work in spite of the preacher's failure must not be made an excuse for poor practice, unworthy of the Lord's message. The Old Testament preacher 'pondered and searched out and set in order ... The Teacher searched to find just the right words' (Eccl.12:9-10 NIV). Paul made it clear that Timothy should not neglect this exercise (1 Tim.4:13,15; 2 Tim.2:15).

A wide range of studies written by outstanding preachers, courses in general public speaking, and guides to giving youth talks have also been consulted, and what follows in this booklet will show an obvious debt to these sources. It is assumed that the student preacher accepts that he will not succeed unless he has first

prepared himself to receive God's message. We cannot over-emphasise the importance of daily prayer and Bible reading to give focus and freshness to our public ministry. In addition, any who would guide others, however simply, needs to study God's guide-book to become soundly grounded in true understanding of its themes. Then we need to observe and listen to people, young and old, to understand how they think and talk, to find out what concerns and motivates them, and so to persuade their minds and reach their hearts. May the Lord of the harvest use these first notes to bless you in your service for His kingdom.

Chapter 1

BASIC HELPS IN GIVING A TALK

Arrangements

It's always wise to check with organisers, especially nearer the date:

The time and place;

The duration;

The aim of the talk

To ask also about the **likely audience** is neither fussy nor conceited. It reassures those who have asked you to speak that you are taking the task seriously, and care about the work that goes into the event.

Gathering Material

- Avoid false starts by focusing on main points to be conveyed, relevant to your aim. You never need to 'cover' the whole subject: the listeners will get into that later if they want.
- It's usually easier to prepare your beginning and ending *last*; i.e., strengthen, or brighten or even simplify it, to gain or hold the confidence of the audience. For a spiritual message, a small number of Scriptures, or one main passage can be properly 'sown' and explained. If you can, emphasise, or repeat (wisely), or print on card one of these to help memory.

- Don't worry about not being original or brilliant! They asked you because they want you to be yourself, as guided by the Holy Spirit. Just pray that you'll get within range of your best.

Making notes

Some speakers write out their **script**. They're sure then that they've thought it through. This is especially good for the beginning and ending. The drawbacks are:

(1) Written sentences can get too far away from spoken language, becoming wooden and stilted.

(2) It takes practice to memorise the script, and patch up a gap forgotten while speaking.

Others 'talk about' a series of **headings and sub-headings**, trusting to their familiarity with the topic. Most use a mixture of both methods, e.g. choosing words carefully for the technical points, or at a key-point in persuading people, and using headings elsewhere. For a short talk (unlike a speech in Parliament!) you finally use headings and sub-headings only. You know your subject, and should only need prompts. If you have time, memorise your beginning and ending.

Estimating how long you'll take

Time a slow reading of a written script; you'll likely take a quarter of that again. Only practice will tell you how long 'talking about' headings will take. Either way, aim to use less than the time allowed. Leave them wanting more.

Delivery

- **Speak out and speak distinctly.** You will use more energy, and speak a little more slowly than in conversation, even if using a microphone.
- Public address equipment doesn't replace **projecting your voice** so that all can hear without strain. But if your voice is strong, don't hector the folk! Softer tones are important for sensitive points—shouting these would be crude.
- Make a note half-way through your headings to **SPEAK OUT** again. Pause there, and take a drink, or move your head and neck back a little, to relax. Then smile at somebody!
- Serious parts don't need a sad, droopy voice. **Try to vary the tone** from heading to heading.
- **Look at various parts of the audience.** What if you had to sit unnoticed through it all?
- Hold notes, or a Bible, to **avoid distracting hand-movements.** Avoid too many gestures, though some are natural and will help emphasise points.
- **Pray (privately)** before you start. **An opening prayer should be brief,** and should not refer to people that someone in the audience might not know.
- Finally, remember that *nobody normal ever manages all this list!*

Chapter 2

GIVING A TALK WITH MORE EXPERIENCE

Speaking to a number of people is an honour and an opportunity. There can be no excuse for mismanagement of the comparatively few occasions when an audience is gathered to hear the Word of God. So if we are giving a spiritual message, it is worthy of our finest effort to prepare and practise the skill needed:

- to ensure that a relevant message is properly conveyed (Eph.6:19-20)
- to give a clear signal (1 Cor.14:8)
- to exploit the distinctive elements of the speaker's background, personality, education, experience, physique and voice (Acts 7:22; Isa.49:2)
- to exercise the gift of Christ by His Spirit (Eph.4:11; 1 Pet.4:11; Rom.12:7).

Preparation

Study the **main points** of your subject. What is the **chief point or purpose**? What will be most important or interesting to your audience? To find where these coincide requires three things:

1. **prayer**
2. **early preparation** to allow careful review of your material.
3. where possible, a wise estimate of the **likely audience**.

All that you have gathered will matter to you, because you gathered it. But do not let any part of it obscure or weaken the impact of your main point. Anything that might do this, or take you past your allotted time, must be firmly omitted. Keep it for possible use another day.

Now plan your notes to **highlight the main points**.

- Find ways of illustrating them so that they are both clear and likely to be remembered. Use everyday situations, or famous events from history. Look at the Lord's example in the Gospels.
- Find ways of emphasising them. This is especially valuable if you can use a Scripture which summarises your point.
- Try repetition from time to time, in an interesting way, e.g. pointing out a different word or phrase each time;
- Try using a *small* number of Powerpoint slides. Too many break your eye-contact with the audience, reducing impact; or a display board — less dependent on technology; making a slogan with rhythm, alliteration, etc.

On your page of notes, you have possibly starred or numbered your main points. That's fine for you, who can see them there. How will you get this emphasis across to your audience?

Structure

An audience recognises and appreciates a sense of planning and progress in the talk—a **beginning, middle and end**; preferably an ending that sums up what they recognise from the earlier stages of the talk.

The **opening** should begin where your audience are in relation to your subject. It matters to you already for various reasons; but where can your audience latch on?

Try one of these:

- a practical illustration of why your topic is important
- an incident from practical or spiritual experience (any audience is curious!)
- a famous saying, or statement from a famous person
- a topical/headline snippet
- a humorous story (with some profit) reassures people you won't be a bore.

But if you can't think of something like this, just state your subject and quickly outline its direction. The audience will be content that you'll get on with it in a business-like way. Some will even prefer this 'no frills' approach, as long as you don't sound flat, dull or depressed. You are allowed to be enthusiastic!

Verbal illustration of course has an important place throughout the talk, and repays special study and practice.

Save visual aids till later in the talk. At the beginning, you have the advantage of a fresh voice and profile to hold attention, so if using Powerpoint, have a title slide for some time before moving on.

Ways to keep an audience listening

- **Fresh ideas:** new light on a Scripture, or a new way of thinking about an old problem. Sound as though you're addressing the needs of this and next year, not yesterday.
- **Careful research:** Not all will follow every technical point, but they respect somebody who knows his facts, and can evaluate them soundly. This includes finding out what today's people think and do, and why, as well as study of the Scriptures.
- **'Highlight'** doesn't mean exaggerate. Avoid the temptation to overstate, or pretend. Someone may later find you out. The preacher should have no need or room for being less than truthful.
- **Memorise some Scriptures** you mean to use. It shows that you care about them, and will repay you elsewhere anyway. It also cuts down the need for people to find the place.

Delivery (and practice beforehand)

- Practise **variety of voice**. Try out your vocal resources: volume and softness, richness and clarity, challenge and appeal; local accent, dialect and Standard English. Play these stops appropriately, for interest and expressiveness.
- In **oral reading** decide where *the key words* are in a sentence, and give them time and emphasis. Look for *climax* in a passage, especially in narrative, and work towards it, with a controlled rise in pitch and volume; sometimes also variation of pace. The sensitive reading of the Scriptures is vital. Try to make them speak freshly, not as if time-honoured and over-familiar.
- Build in **change of pace** and work towards each key-point in your address as a sort of mini-goal. In 30 minutes you would allow 5

minutes for hymn & prayer, and another 5 for over-run. You would likely have three points of emotional intensity, whether of searching meditation, challenge or appeal. These should get special attention to timing, pace, pitch, volume and tone. ('Tone' is the mood of your voice, e.g. scathing or soothing.)

Habit is extremely strong, so you have to work consciously against it, changing pace and pitch from time to time, and relaxing the neck and face muscles. If you have won the company's attention, you can heighten it by making them wait. Pitch and pace demand energy: not constant hectoring, but controlled vigour varied with more reflective or informative spells. You must sound as though you care about getting a response from each listener.

Visual contact

- Study the wise use of gesture. Keep it natural, and varied. Also move position from time to time. This changes the play of echo around your voice, and gives you a fresh profile. But if gesture and movement are overdone, they become distracting and irritating. When you're feeling strong, ask someone to tell you about your favourite mannerisms! Remember to smile at suitable points.
- Consider the use of a visual chart, Powerpoint or other display, to reinforce a key text, to mark progress, or revise some point. But don't leave a visual inactive for too long; and don't display too much at one time. Slides if overused become a distracting barrier. Listeners prefer to do some thinking for themselves, and dislike being manipulated too obviously. Older people are usually less impressed by comic drawings.

- Where you expect (or should be expecting) **visitors who are not regular Bible readers**, use Scripture passages that are easy to find. People usually like to be seen to open the Bible as others do, not just ‘sit back and listen.’
- **Watch the audience.** Try to give everyone a personal look. This will help you respond to their mood. They will also think of you as having noticed that they were there.

Language

The Lord used the everyday Aramaic of His time and place. Though some points in your talk will require sacred language for sacred matters, we need to practise using language accessible to people with little Bible background, or even little acquaintance with religious or literary terms.

Time-keeping and finishing

Even people who will happily stand around for half an hour afterwards just chatting do not readily forgive a speaker who exceeds his expected time. (The expectation is more important than the actual period.) It’s always better to err in stopping ‘early.’ Cut something out quite ruthlessly if need be—even the ending, if it comes to that. If you stop in time, they might ask you back!

Your ending should give a sense of having reached the goal—a satisfying closing point. It should either be a proposal you have worked towards—for example, an appeal for a specific action or attitude; or simply sum up the main point of your subject. If this has several aspects or sub-points, make sure they are stated as briefly and memorably as possible. By this stage they should not need

careful re-statement or explanation. It's important not to produce something new or totally unexpected in your ending, since the audience are less fresh, and in their eyes you are also less fresh.

Chapter 3

Oral Reading and Delivery in Detail

Nehemiah 8:2-3 reminds us of the importance of clarity and feeling in the public reading of Scripture. The high regard we should have for the word of God is sufficient reason for giving time to practising this art, and aiming to make our performance more worthy of its subject than is often the case. Reading to the sick or elderly (who are often deaf in some degree) is also a great service, and deserves our best effort.

Preparation

Read your chosen passage or texts aloud, deciding on the following features, and where you might forget, mark the margin or text with the signs suggested:

(a) The **structure** of a passage or sentence:

- for natural pauses, e.g. stages in narrative; changes in topic or mood: use ...
- mark a climax with < or use underlining
- for a key-verse that it would be effective to read twice use **x2**

(b) Decide on the appropriate **tone and pace**.

Avoid the old depressing habit of an unvaryingly slow **pace**, and a rise and fall in pitch at the end of every clause, which is often *thought* to sound reverential. For some statements of passion or

lament, a briskening pace is even called for, followed by a pause, e.g. David's lament for Saul and Jonathan (2 Sam.1:21-22). The simple detail in a narrative, or an explanatory aside, or the excitement of quick action should never be dragged out.

In contrast, Isaiah 53 with its series of surprises and deep feeling needs well measured pauses between clauses and between verses, and generally a contemplative pace that dwells on each thought. But variation is also needed, else those effects will be lost; e.g. v.3 finishes more quickly, approaching a dismissive manner.

Tone Challenge? Command? Appeal? Tenderness? Reflection? Bitterness? Joy?

(c) Use a **pause mark** if you read music or an accent < above the most important words—but just a few. Any of these emphases suffers if overdone.

(d) Practise at home **how to stand**. Avoid stiffness or affected posturing, but express by an upright, attentive stance that you expect from the audience full attention and respect for the reading. You will learn later to adapt towards a less formal approach when appealing for understanding, or inviting audience-participation from a youth-group.

(e) Practise how to **develop volume** without harshness or strain. The normal tendency is to raise pitch. This obscures vowels, making them sound too alike; leaves no flexibility for expressiveness; can make you sound angry; and so becomes monotonous or

embarrassing.

Avoid this by practising volume at the deepest pitch you can produce. Then allow pitch to rise when you wish it to, i.e. for emphasis. Then consciously drop pitch again while maintaining volume. (This is also good practice for reading to deaf/elderly people, who lose the distinctness of signals at high pitch.)

All this is another reason for well-placed pauses, allowing you to breathe and regain pitch control. Nervousness tightens throat muscles, and the energy needed for voice-projection will soon teach you to pause!

Delivery in more detail

- Before being called to speak, steady yourself and help relaxation by breathing steadily—not too deeply, but enough to keep yourself in control, and oxygen reaching all parts!
- Check in advance where you are expected to mount a platform, avoiding wires, etc.
- Hold your Bible, or if hands are shaky (quite normal!) hold the lectern lightly until you can relax one or both arms—but not with a hand in a pocket.
- Look out for faces you know all round the hall, and read/speak as if for that person especially—but not for too long.
- Take a drink at a natural pause, e.g. when you move from one passage to another. If you have a slip of paper in place, you'll have more time.
- If reading out of doors, e.g. at a camp or a funeral, it pays to write out your passage/verses on cards, so as to cope with

adverse weather.

Amplification

- You owe your audience and the organisers wise use of equipment provided. Remember *no-one will be interested in remarks about microphones*: They just want you to get on with your message.
- On a platform, it is very hard to tell how the amplified signal sounds out in the hall. Look out for people straining to hear, or ask them to make a sign if they aren't hearing well. It can be a good idea to make a note to ask again half-way through your talk. If privileged to speak in a hall with a gallery, give special attention to those in the gallery and those under it at the back

Free-standing microphones

- These are less often used now, but don't ignore the possibility. These are usually set to function best at about 5 or 6 inches from your mouth; any closer and sound is distorted, breathing is picked up, etc.
- Use the reading of a hymn to gauge the best position. Then stand well back for the singing! Take note of any previous speaker's stance and its effect on the system, and try to learn from his mistakes or good practice.
- If you are taller or shorter than the previous speaker, switch off the microphone (to avoid it squealing) and raise or lower it. If you prefer to ask the chair or the person monitoring the equipment, everyone will appreciate you consulting the expert.

Tie-clip type

Around 2 to 3 inches below your tie-knot should be best. Especially avoid jacket-lapels brushing the microphone. Unless you have practised with the clip, read your hymn without it, and then use the period of singing to don the clip.

Radio mike

A transmitter will sit in your top pocket or belt. The on/off switch can be quite small, so lay books down when switching off, to avoid fumbling at an awkward angle with the wrong hand.

With all of these, you still need to **project your voice**. It always sounds loud enough to you, but you're not the audience!

Chapter 5

Giving a Public Testimony

With current trends in society hostile to the gospel and the disciplined life, there is a decreased pool of testimonies to draw upon, and it's vital to bring out the greatest value of such a moving witness for the benefit especially of unsaved friends whom we invite to gospel occasions. We focus here on the positives that deliver such value.

The core of a testimony

Central to a convert's story is how and why they were moved to personal faith on the Saviour, and to commitment to discipleship and service in the churches of God. Previous experiences will always be very real to the speaker, but too much time given to detail of these, and of changes in lifestyle after conversion, robs the talk of the vital factors that brought about the change. This deserves time at least equal to the other two parts. It's probably also in two stages: finding a personal relationship with Christ; and then deciding to follow Him as Lord. Both matter to others who may be under conviction from the Spirit of God about these steps for themselves.

The circumstances and background of the speaker's life may not resemble that of the listener, whose problems and concerns may be quite different. What matters most to the visitor we have described

are the factors in salvation that apply to all mankind:

- **the effect of the living word of God**
- **recognition of its truth**
- **forsaking of sin**
- **trust in the cross work of Jesus**
- **the call to discipleship**
- **and the prompts to decision along the way.**

The whole story is a witness to the power of Jesus's life, death and resurrection to engender faith in those who hear, and to draw us after Him; so we fail our Saviour if we omit the central events of our decisions.

The power of Scripture

Often in spite of the best efforts of the preacher or personal one-to-one witness, the great gospel verses that were instrumental in the speaker's conversion can be forgotten or omitted, and less relevant ones brought to the fore. Verses that focus on the need for and transaction of salvation can be commended as **anchors for faith** to the convert later, by wise friends, or by overseers who interview him/her for baptism, because a story of feelings and emotional experience alone is a poor foundation compared with the clear statements of the Word. Such verses then are well worth including in your story.

A strong witness can answer with Scripture such questions as, "Do you really think salvation is for someone with your degree of sinfulness?" Or, "Can you lose your salvation with bad behaviour

afterwards, letting the Lord down?” Or, “Are you saved for ever?” Or, “Don’t you have to show a clean record for a period before you will be acceptable to God?” “Is it important to belong to a church?” “Does it matter to God which church you attend?” We could list several more FAQs, and the best answers come from Scripture. **The living Word has power in itself**, and is an essential tool for the faithful witness (1 Pet.1:23-25).

The call to discipleship

Everyone in the Bible record who placed faith in Jesus was also called to follow the Lord and offer Him a life of service in fellowship with other believers — ‘saved to serve’. Often today this step can be delayed while the convert adjusts to the new lifestyle. But the next definite step is clearly to be baptised, as the Lord commanded through His apostles (Matt.28:19-20); and then to be added to a church of God (Acts 2:41-42,47), with the added significance of being added to the Lord (Acts 5:14).

So why miss this life-changing experience from your story of faith? What stirred you to offer your life to the Master, and seek the fellowship and support of a church, will be an instructive challenge to others who are being called to stand for Christ against the social flow. Again, Scripture is our unchanging guide, no matter through whom it comes. It’s good to make clear the verses above that show how the first churches were formed.

The responsibility of mentors

Just as Saul was guided and cared for by Ananias after his encounter with Jesus on the Damascus road (Acts 9:10-20), so God has mentors to show you the way. Those who brought you to Christ, or to the meetings of the church, and the elders or shepherds there should be fulfilling the Lord's command to 'make disciples.' There should be a series of classes in the basics of Christian service, one-to-one or in a group of those new in the faith. If this is delayed or overlooked, ask and remind them!

That will then make a reassuring end to your testimony, since everyone values caring friends.

Chapter 6

Working with Youth

The Message

1. Prepare the ground

We can expect little Bible knowledge today, so open up the soil with topics like the following:

- Man's place in creation
- God the creator
- The complexity of creation
- Evidence of the order & balance of an earlier time (Don't use those words!)
- The limits of the human mind—vastness of eternity, space
- Conscience
- Man's need for Someone beyond himself
- Moral standards, arising from our sense of justice, not just from social training.

There is a lot to grasp here, before the Gospel has much meaning to the hearer.

2. The Gospel

- Man's failure and self-choosing
- We cannot adequately help ourselves
- God's judgement
- His way of escape through Jesus

Stress Christ as Creator, Lord, leader, with all authority in heaven and on earth; His power over spirits. (Some young people may have met serious involvement with cults and demonology.)

3. The Material

Bible narrative is unfairly neglected today, but it offers: action; social instruction; character; a pictorial presentation of truth; structure (but you may need to learn how to tell a story.) Teach along with a **key text** and illustrate the theme also with stories of today that show relevance to situations important to youth.

Topics of interest to youth

(Note: use of these does not hinder presentation of the truths of the gospel, which should be taught whether popular or not.)

Growing up, Birth and death, Family relationships, Physical excellence, Skills & achievement, Adventure & Heroism (although this is an unfashionable word!) Animals and Birds (especially up to age 11/12), Fairness, Honesty, Kindness vs. Injustice, Cheating, Cruelty, War, Building, Property, Wealth, Government, Authority,

Careers

For older youth:

Handling money, Overcoming temptation, Setting limits, Peer-pressure and media, Be Your Own Man/Woman, Health and Diet, Clothes and Appearance, Morals, Music

4. Presentation

1. It's vital to decide the **AIM** of a talk/lesson, and then cut out anything irrelevant. You have limited time to get **ONE** main point across.
2. Build in a **structure** especially if not using a story. Indicate from time to time where you have reached in your plan. Don't depend too much on worksheets. You should do the teaching first.
3. An **object for illustration** is most useful further on when attention flags. Use members of the audience to help.
4. **Arrive in time** to check or mount facilities.
5. **Stand back** from front rows, else by rolling their heads back, they can still see only your waistline, and feel neglected. Seat a group to face you and a wall, not the other groups.
6. It is valuable to teach **memorising** of a relevant verse and reward co-operation.

7. In planning a term, keep up **variety**. Use singing as a break as well as an introduction. It may not be so popular with teens. Keep checking which tunes or words they really like.

8. **Something to make** and take home makes a link with parents and home; a reminder of success. Give the less able something simpler to do, so that it's finished in time.

9. Be there **early to give a personal welcome**, and build relationships with talk about the young people's week.

10. Work at **contacting the home**. Parents like to talk about their children. Keep this up during the summer recess.

11. **Continuity is essential**. A relationship with the children is what brings them, and needs to be nursed from week to week.

5. Discipline

It cannot be stressed too often that discipline depends on *your message*, as above, and *your relationship*. You have to earn respect—and affection, if possible. With some bruised children this can take a lot of time. Don't give up on them, as others may have done in their lives.

- Discipline **begins with yourself**—care with appropriate clothes; good time-keeping; keeping promises (how many promises did the Lord fail to honour?); self-control—of anger or exasperation or tiredness; honesty; love for the unlovely.

- It depends on **how much you care** about your message and aims. Your talk and material must earn respect and interest.
- Aim to **make friends** but don't become too familiar or a 'doormat'. This also implies firmness and fairness in setting bounds and standards. Make friends with wise gifts, but the gift they need most is *you spending time with them*, outings, games, etc.
- **Look ahead and be a leader.** Avoid confrontation. Cultivate using language to make a child ashamed of misconduct, not to decry character.
- If speaking to a group, ask **helpers** to look after and sit with a group or row. Don't let workers bunch together at the back, or get distracted with furniture, etc. The children claim first attention always.
- Isolate or divert **trouble-makers**. Try to employ an attention-seeker in some way that cannot be abused. Otherwise sit between them, etc.
- You can withhold **extras/rewards**. Final sanction is exclusion, preferably with someone to help enforce it. This is of no use if not **consistent and fair**. Don't allow the passage of time to overthrow an exclusion set for the next week(s). Visit parents to ensure the right story gets home.
- **Report bad behaviour** to other workers so that you all agree to

hold the line. Some of more experience might advise a better way to handle a particular case. You're best to accept that!

- When programming a youth night, consider giving your talk near the beginning, so that trouble-makers don't keep missing the message or get the fun and then make an excuse to leave early.

6. In the minibus or car

Remember to abide by your church Safeguarding Policy. For example, the UK Churches of God Policy requires a male and a female present where at all possible. The driver must concentrate on driving, and make this clear to the young folk, despite what provocation you may get. If they get noisy or cheeky, stop the vehicle and take charge again. Remind them that the youth-night is a voluntary service that you can cancel, or exclude them from.

Make clear that persistent offenders won't be picked up next time (*and see that this promise is kept by you and any other leader in charge next time*; the team must support one another.) If the back seats in the bus get rowdy, ask the other worker to sit farther back and engage with them.

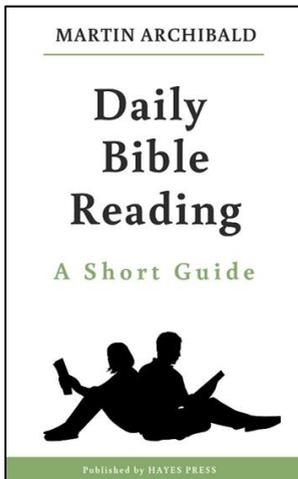
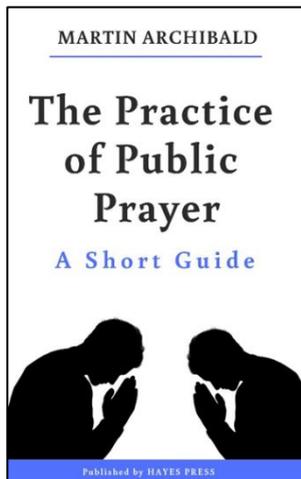
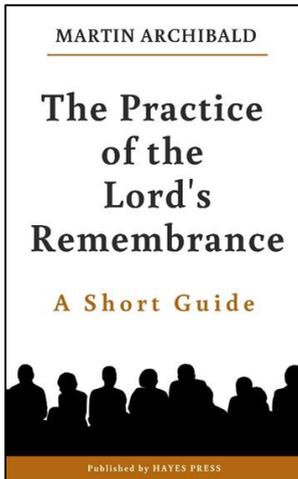
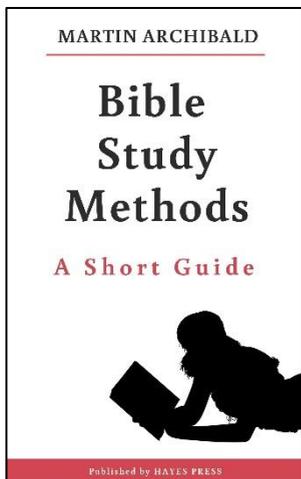
*Lord, speak to me, that I may speak
In living echoes of Thy tone;
As Thou hast sought, so let me seek
Thine erring children, lost and lone.*

*Oh, teach me Lord, that I may teach
The precious things Thou dost impart;
And wing my words that they may reach
The hidden depths of many a heart.*

*Oh, fill me with Thy fullness, Lord,
Until my very heart o'erflow
In kindling thought and glowing word,
Thy love to tell, Thy praise to show.*

F.R. Havergal

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