

Why learning to preach might not be so different to learning to play golf

Can you teach preaching? I am often asked that question. After all, is not preaching spiritual gifting from God; a spiritual exercise dependent on the Holy Spirit's enabling? Older preachers used to speak of divine 'unction' to refer to the anointing which God gives when preaching is razor sharp and penetrating the soul.

So, can you teach it? Well, I am banking on some teaching being required, or otherwise I am out of a job as 'Director of the School of Preaching' at Wycliffe Hall!

As I often remind my students, no illustration is perfect and the parameters of the illustration need to be understood. However, it seems to me that there is some parallel between learning a sport or musical instrument and learning to preach. After all, we all recognise that Alfred Brendel (who recently gave his last ever piano recital in England) or Tiger Woods are exceptionally gifted. At the same time, we recognise that their giftedness has only flourished as a result of hard practice and rigorous labour.

The Apostle Paul encourages Timothy to: *Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth.* (2 Tim 2:15)

When I moved to London about 10 years ago I missed my walking in the beautiful Derbyshire Peak District. So, I decided that the next best thing was to take up a game that I realise is often called "a good walk spoiled"! How do you go about learning to play golf? I wonder, leaving aside the necessary prayerful pleading that comes alongside preaching preparation (although I did try that too with my golf!), whether there are not some parallels in how one learns to preach.

Books – before starting out on the course I read quite a number of books. These were useful for learning what a "Birdie" "Fore" "9 Iron" etc. are. But there is still quite a big disconnect between what one reads and what one experiences when wielding a club. Indeed it is possible to play golf without ever reading what others have said about how the game should be played. And of course the same is true for preaching.

Driving Range – Ah, now we are getting somewhere. Having bought my first second hand pair of golf clubs I was ready to have a crack at hitting a ball. Despite the slices and mis-fires it felt good to be taking out one's pent up energy on that little white ball. And, to my surprise, with a bit of practice, shots went a bit straighter and a bit further. As a 17 year old, a relatively new Christian, I was grateful for the trust which my Vicar put in me to let me loose on his unsuspecting congregation and to preach my first sermon. And I certainly know that I, for one, was reasonably edified by the experience!

On the Course – the first 9 hole game at a public course. Well, there were flashes of genius! But most of the time was spent looking for the miscued ball in the shrub land and the heather.

But at least I was playing and I got through my first complete game. There is no substitute for preaching in front of a real audience. Of course, they are not there as your practice ground. Preaching has to be a real, spiritual experience for it to be preaching at all. It is more important that preachers are godly and prayerful than they fill their heads reading books. But of course, it is not either/or. We learn as we go, and particularly for preachers, the maxim “lifelong learner” should be true.

Back to the Driving Range – with an Instructor! – Now I had got serious. I had the bug. I found moments of exhilaration in the game, but I was very conscious of my inadequacies. Hitting the balls down the driving range with an Instructor present was a combination of learning and unlearning. As well as working on stance and swing, he worked on the range of skills I needed in order to play the whole game. It is no use rocketing 50 balls 200yard down the driving range and yet be unable to chip it 10 yards or putt it home. This is where mentoring and modelling comes into the preaching experience. Peer critique, preaching classes and ongoing feedback from carefully selected critiques really helps this process.

A Walking Lesson – best of all have been the couple of lessons I have had in a real game with a golf instructor walking me through it, coaching me as I go. . Preaching is caught and taught. I think I learned more from sitting under Dick Lucas’ preaching and listening to Dr Martyn Lloyd Jones’ tapes than anything else. Hearing gifted people do it inspires me and enthuses me to learn from them and do it better.

Play, play, play – when all is said and done, playing the game, again and again, is what makes the golfer good. Yes everything previously mentioned matters. But golfers improve by doing it again and again. I notice this in my preaching. If I am preaching regularly I preach better. Perhaps it is because I am forced to spend more time with God as I prepare. Perhaps it is because there are skills which I hone and use more frequently. Perhaps it is because I get to know my audience and my material more thoroughly. But I do know that preachers need to preach in order to preach better.

Actually, learning to play golf was not a linear process. All of these things happened (and continue to happen) at the same time, and all are necessary. The same is true for the godly skills of preaching.

So, can you teach preaching?

Well, yes. But teaching preaching (or rather, learning to preach) is a combination of books, lessons, seminars, preaching classes, peer critique, good modelling, practice, and a humble dependence on God for a life time’s ministry.

No teacher of preaching thinks that he can do all that is needed to teach preachers! You can’t learn it in the classroom; you can’t learn it from books But they are necessary starting points.

For the above reasons training preachers at a place like Wycliffe Hall is the most integrative of the disciplines: bringing together all biblical and theological knowledge; systematising it and clarifying the material; putting it together in a structured and logical way; allowing the message to form, challenge and sanctify the preacher; learning together in community; putting it into practice in live settings; being enthused to spend a lifetime developing and honing these skills; and under God, prayerfully allowing him to shape and mould the messenger as much as the message in order that congregations hear God's voice through them.