

**TO FLY
TO SERVE**

TO FLY TO SERVE

Practical help for giving a Bible talk

Adrian Reynolds

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10Publishing, a division of 10ofthose.com

Unit C, Tomlinson Road, Leyland, PR25 2DY, England

Email: info@10ofthose.com

Website: www.10ofthose.com

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TO FLY TO SERVE

In 2011 British Airways, the UK's national airline, adopted a new marketing strategy. Gone was the phrase 'The world's favourite airline' (principally because they weren't any more) and instead was the rather more mysterious 'To fly. To serve.' BA wanted to try to reintroduce something of the magic of flying, harking back to a bygone age when aeroplanes were cruise liners in the sky. The slogan (emblazoned on the BA cap) was accompanied by a slick marketing campaign with soft-focus shots and happy children holding the hands of handsome pilots.

The pilots and crew, we were assured, were there to serve us. That's what they lived for; that's what they flew for. Now call me a cynic but I think that BA is probably just as interested in commercial practicalities – like profits. Still, I suppose it's a good sentiment.

Right now, you may be a bit puzzled. This isn't quite the start you expected. And in the remote and unlikely event that you expected a book about flying a plane, I'm doubly sorry. Right now as I write this, believe it or not, I'm actually *on* a plane. I would love to be in the cockpit, surveying the scene. Maybe we think

flying sounds glamorous. However, what we need to understand is that this short book is about something *more* glamorous: something with *more* potential for excitement and something that will take people from A to B where B is the most delightful, exciting, incredible and – above all – eternal destination.

'To fly. To serve' is a great sentiment for BA, despite my cynicism. And it's also a great attitude for every man or woman who is asked to come and speak from the Bible. The focus on service for BA is to get you from A to B comfortably, safely and happily. The Bible speaker has many of the same goals. He (or she, in the appropriate setting) wants to get the hearers to a certain destination, of which more in a moment. His aim in speaking is not to draw attention to himself. Nor is it to give hearers a kind of fairground ride. There are, if you like, a lot of similarities and I'm going to use these to develop some helpful guidelines for giving a Bible talk.

This book, then, is essentially one long parable. Perhaps, at times, you will feel that I'm pushing it too far. That may be so. But as long as you take on board the lessons and let them sink in, I'm not really too bothered.

Flying a plane? Ha! That's nothing! This is a short book about something miles better: giving a Bible talk.

WHAT'S IN A WORD?

By using the phrase 'Bible talk' I've tried to be as general as possible. I want this help to cover those who are preaching, doing a short talk at a Christian Union, leading a Bible study, introducing an evangelistic Bible study and even taking a Sunday school lesson. I happen to believe that, in every case, the language of 'talk' is not really quite the thing. Preaching, in particular, should never be relegated to using this kind of language. Even the humble study with just a few participants is not adequately described using this wording. Nevertheless, I wanted a description that would capture everything, and for the moment 'Bible talk' is it. Please work with it!

MISSING PIECES

You've probably already noticed that this is a short book. It means it's going to be pretty useless to prop open a door, or to impress your friends with, 'Look what I'm reading!' I recommend *War and Peace* – in hardback, of course – for both of those tasks. If this book is not being used as a doorstop or a crowd-puller, then it means that you're probably going to have to read it. So let me break one piece of news to you before you begin.

I'm not going to say anything – or very little, anyway – about how to actually understand a Bible text. There

are several reasons for that. First, there are lots of very good books about that already. I've listed some of them at the end. There are also good courses and online materials you can access which will help you with this. Second, I don't want to distract from the main purpose of this book. There are lots of people who are simply excellent at interpreting Bible texts and passages. They have letters after their names and often a few in front too. I've benefited from them hugely. But teaching others is more than understanding the text (though never less). That's why I'm going to focus on the practicalities of actually giving a Bible talk.

Also, and most importantly, you'll not find any technical jargon. I preached my first sermon aged eighteen as a fresh-faced first-year university student. I don't think the small church where I was worshipping (as the only student) knew quite what had hit them – they got the whole of Habakkuk (that's quite a lot of prophecy) in one go. What I really needed was training or a book just like this. I'm writing it, I guess, for my younger self. So in it there's no mention of exegesis, eisegesis, homiletics and historical-grammatical methods, but just plain old English.

HOLY SPIRIT, WHERE ART THOU?

There's one other key omission from this book and I need to explain it. I will say nothing more beyond

this short section about the work of the Holy Spirit in speaking God's word. That's not because I don't believe in him! No, quite the opposite. I believe any Bible speaker in any setting must be prayerfully dependent on the power of the Spirit in their preparation and delivery, beforehand and afterwards. Only when he is at work will anything happen.

But neither should a solid belief in the work of the Spirit stop us from thinking and planning our talks carefully. After all, we don't revert to such fatalism in any other area of life. We don't close our eyes whilst driving in the mistaken belief that the Spirit will guide us through. No, we are not fatalists, like Muslims. So we work hard at understanding the text and (what I'm really interested in here) delivering a talk that is tuned so that it is easy to hear and take in.

RULES ARE MADE TO BE BROKEN

This is a book for first-timers – those just starting out on Bible talks – or those who want to get a few ideas to do something better they're already doing. That's not to say that experienced speakers won't benefit. Some old-timers get into bad habits that need certain realignment every now and again. I should know – I'm one of them.

The tips in this book are not hard and fast rules, but rather a wise starting point. So please hear me clearly: I'm not giving you the Ten Commandments of public

speaking. However, what I trust you will find here are helpful ideas or – at a stretch – guidelines that will improve your Bible talk.

But don't fasten your seat belt just yet. First, let's get out the holiday brochure ...

DESTINATION



WHERE DO YOU FANCY GOING?

That flight I just told you about, the one I am on, is heading for Washington DC, Dulles Airport. I'm off to the US for a preaching conference. At least, I *hope* that's where we're heading. Frankly, if we land in a few hours' time and I find myself in Chicago, Illinois, I'm going to be pretty hacked off (no offence to the dear people of the Windy City). The pilot is there to fly the plane to the destination already fixed by the airline and its schedulers – he has no right to change his mind about where he lands. And we, the paid-up passengers, fully expect that the pilot will serve us best by taking us where he is told to go by his superiors.

Any person who speaks from the Bible may feel that they're in the captain's seat. To a certain extent that is true. Take a preacher, for example. He can determine the length of the sermon; he's responsible for the content; he decides what illustrations to add in; he works through the application; and he brings the sermon to a good conclusion.

But the one thing a preacher is not at liberty to do is to determine the destination. Let me explain. We believe the Bible to be God's word. Indeed, this is the Bible's own testimony about itself: