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SPEAKING AND READING IN WORSHIP: Part Two

A Here's the conclusion of "Speaking and Reading..."

B I offer it almost unedited.

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19 Finally, a grab bag of tips:

20 Both men and women: Try to lower your pitch. This is specially important for many women, but men too can sometimes sound shrill or screechy in the ambo. This is good advice in any case, Monday through Saturday out there in the world. No, you don't want to develop a fake "pulpit tone" that you affect only in worship. But every human voice sounds lovelier when it's not shrill or squeaky. If your voice is naturally high pitched, do everyone a favour and try to lower it.

21 Not just in worship: All the time. The hard of hearing will thank you.

22 Be especially aware of difficult or unfamiliar words in your speech. Enunciate any problem words with special care. Remember: It's better to use simple, everyday language than high-falutin' words or constructions. (Aren't you glad Martin Luther King said, "I have a dream!" instead of "I want to articulate a new paradigm!")

23 If necessary, when you don't want to avoid an unfamiliar word, spell it out: "Eschaton: That's E-S-C-H-A-T-O-N." Give helpful etymologies. "It's from the Greek, and it means the end times, the end of history. But not just the end – like punkt, it's over – but the end in the sense of fulfillment, the realization of promise and potential..." That kind of thing.

24 I think Christian congregations should be able to tolerate acquiring at least a little theology, learning at least an occasional unfamiliar word. (Hey, I preached a sermon some months ago about the distinctions between metastatic and anthropogenic eschatology! Sure, I spent a good deal of time and effort giving definitions and etymologies to my listeners: That was the whole point of my sermon. But I had fun, and so did they, to hear their comments afterward.)

25 Beware of contractions in public speech. My old-age ears find it very difficult sometimes to distinguish aurally between “can” and “can’t”, between “is” and “isn’t”, in careless public speech. Better to avoid the contraction altogether and say “can not” and “is not”.

26 Be alert to monotonous melody patterns, in the advice of a friend, a homiletician. He notes: Beware of lilting, a continuous upward inflection such as we commonly use to ask a question. It communicates an uncertainty, a lack of confidence in what you’re saying.

27 Again, advice from my homiletician friend: Pauses have particular functions in English speech. Pause to get listeners’ attention and to prepare them for an important meaning. Pause to let a meaning germinate. Don’t rush on after a significant meaning has been expressed or a climax has been reached, or a potent image has been conveyed. Pause to communicate a shift of scene or transition in your text. Pause for dramatic effect.

28 Show your fingers when you’re counting small numbers in public speech. Count out the integers on your hand, with your fingers. I find that’s extremely helpful in registering your meaning with me in my hearing loss. Eloquent gestures in any case can be enormously useful in compelling public speech. Turn off the audio on your TV – don’t listen, just watch – and take lessons from a fine public speaker, like Barack Obama. (To be sure, there aren’t many of them these days. More’s the pity...)

29 A not-so-unimportant footnote: Almost all of the above is useful to remember when you’re on the telephone with someone with hearing loss. I often find myself re-playing a voice-mail message, sometimes four or five times, before I can make sense of some careless speaker on the other end of the line...

30 Footnote Number Two: And almost all of the above is useful as well to remember when you’re asking a question or making a comment from the floor at the conclusion of someone else’s public address. Even in the smallest assemblies, when your chance comes to speak – as in a question period – do not remain seated, hiding behind the person in front of you, and vocalizing your comment in a tiny whisper.

31 Do us all a favour, those of us with hearing loss, and stand, if you are able, so we can see you – so it’s clear who’s speaking, and so we can read your lips, if necessary – and speak firmly and forcibly as noted above. Not to observe these courtesies is just plain impolite to the rest of us. Hearing challenged or not.

32 Would you add anything to my list? I’m open to enlarging this conversation.

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