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Evangels of Grace

Billy Graham

☛ THE WELL-KNOWN GERMAN THEOLOGIAN RUDOLPH BULTMANN asked the question that is appropriate for our times, “How do we communicate the gospel in a secularistic and technological age?” This question might be put differently in different cultures, but all of us are concerned with effectively communicating the gospel. In many circumstances, it means what missiologists have called “contextualization.” This means we adapt our methods to the culture and society in which we are called to proclaim the gospel. But let’s make it clear: we have no authority from Scripture to alter the *message*. The message can never be contextualized.

Thus, I would like to ask this question again: *How do we communicate the gospel with power in this materialistic, scientific, rebellious secular, immoral, humanistic age?*

1. *The Key*

The key to the basic question that unlocks the door to effective gospel communication is in 1 Cor. 2:2, “For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.”

Look at the context of this verse. When Paul went to Corinth, it was one of the most idolatrous, pagan, intellectual, and immoral cities in the entire Roman world. If you wanted to condemn someone as an immoral person, you called him a “Corinthian.” When Paul looked at this city, and felt God’s leadership to start a church there, what did he do? How could he communicate in that place? Do not forget, there was not a single other Christian in town. Paul was the only believer. What would he do? What would you do? How do you “preach the gospel” in an atmosphere alien to its very nature? That is always the question. It is the prime question today.

2. *The Power of the Gospel*

If we could ask Paul personally those searching questions, perhaps

he would say, “My intelligence alone will not be able to handle it. I do not have the logic or the arguments to compel the Corinthians to accept the truth of the gospel.” What, then, did he do? He said, with positive faith, “For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.” Why such a statement? Paul knew that there was a built-in power in the Cross; it has its own communicative power. Paul well knew that the Holy Spirit takes the simple message of the Cross, with its message of redemptive love and grace, through the proclaiming of Christ, and infuses it into lives with authority and power.

Furthermore, the Spirit’s work is vital, for “the man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned” (1 Cor. 2:14).

Therefore, when we go to proclaim the gospel of Christ, we by faith know that when we proclaim the *kerygma* (as Paul describes it in 1 Cor. 15), when we preach Christ crucified, there’s a power—dynamite—in it. Proclaimers of the gospel must always realize, as Paul stressed, that the natural man simply cannot accept the truth of Christ unless the veil is lifted by the Holy Spirit.

But the marvelous fact is, the Holy Spirit takes the message and communicates it to the heart and mind, with power, and breaks down every barrier. It’s a supernatural act of the Spirit of God. No evangelist can have God’s touch on his or her ministry until he or she realizes these realities and preaches in the power of the Holy Spirit. In the final analysis, the Holy Spirit is the Communicator.

3. *Some Safe Assumptions*

Now, I want to say a word about some important aspects of proclamation of the gospel. Let me be personal right here! When I go out and proclaim the gospel, in every congregation, and any group—whether it’s on a street corner in Nairobi; or in a meeting in Seoul, Korea; or in a tribal situation in Zaire; or in a large stadium in New York City—I know there are certain things that are true in the hearts and minds of all people, certain psychological and spiritual factors that exist in everyone. As I begin to communicate, I can trust the Holy Spirit to strike certain responsive chords in every human heart that hears.

a. *Life’s needs are not totally met by social improvement or material affluence.* This is true around the world and in every culture. Jesus said, “A man’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions” (Luke 12:15).

b. *There is an essential “emptiness” in every life without Christ.* All

humanity keeps crying for something, something—they do not know what it is. Give a person a million dollars—it doesn't satisfy. Or give the person sex and every form of sensuality; nor does that ever satisfy the deep longing inside that keeps crying for satisfaction. I talked to a man some time ago who is supposedly one of the sex symbols of America. He said, "I've slept with some of the most beautiful women in the world. But it doesn't bring fulfillment and peace." He went on, "I'm one of the most miserable men in the world." There is another level to life. That we can assume as we preach Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit.

I have spoken at a number of the world's most famous universities, and I have heard the pitiful cry of youth who are intellectually, psychologically, and spiritually lost. They are searching for something, and they don't know what it is. I once talked to Dr. Bok, president of Harvard University. I asked him what was the greatest thing lacking among the students. He thought for a moment and then answered, "Commitment." Pascal put it right when he said, "There's a God-shaped vacuum in every life that only God can fill." When we proclaim the gospel, we're talking directly to that emptiness. The person with whom you're communicating, whether in personal witnessing or before a group, has a built-in receptivity to the message of the Cross, because Christ alone fills the void.

c. *We can assume in our hearers a loneliness.* Some have called it "cosmic loneliness." I have a friend who is a psychiatrist and a theologian at an American university. I asked him on one occasion, "What is the greatest problem of the patients that come to you for help?" He thought a moment and said, "Loneliness." He went on, "When you get right down to it, it is a loneliness for God." We all sense something of that. For example, we can be in a crowd of people, even at a party, and suddenly, with all the people around laughing, a loneliness will sweep over you—just for a moment. That is "cosmic loneliness," and it is everywhere: loneliness in the suburbs, loneliness in the ghettos, loneliness in Africa, loneliness in Latin America, loneliness in Japan. It is a loneliness that only God can fill. You can assume that also in preaching Christ.

d. *We are speaking to people who have a sense of guilt.* This is perhaps the most universal of all human experiences, and it is devastating. The head of a mental institution in London said, "I could release half of my patients if I could but find a way to rid them of their sense of guilt." What a tremendously relevant message we have for that problem. This is what the Cross is all about. When we preach Christ, we are speaking directly to the nagging, depressing problem of guilt. And that problem is

always there. You don't make people feel guilty; they already know it. Tell them what the guilt is. Tell them it is rebellion against God, and tell them the Cross is the answer!

e. *There is the universal fear of death.* We do not like to talk about death in our generation. But death is real. In many parts of the world you can turn on the television and see movie stars such as Marilyn Monroe or Clark Gable; they look alive, but they are dead. Somehow television, especially in Western society, has cushioned death. Yet the specter is always there. The subtle fear cannot be silenced. But here is the glorious news: our Lord came to nullify death. In His own death and resurrection, He made three things inoperative: sin, death, and hell. That's the message of the Cross.

4. *Some Principles of Communicating the Gospel*

All these assumptions can be realized as we preach Christ. The Holy Spirit will apply the message to these deep-seated needs. But now the question is: In the midst of all these assumptions, *how* are we to communicate the gospel?

a. Communicate the gospel with *authority*. Preach it with assurance, remembering that "faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ" (Rom. 10:17). If I have one criticism of modern theological education, especially in Europe and America, it is this: I do not think we are putting enough emphasis on authoritative preaching. Where are the great preachers today? Where are the Luthers, the Calvins, the Knoxes, the Spurgeons? Churches are constantly asking for recommendations for pastors, and they all say, "In our particular situation, we have to have somebody who can preach." But where are the preachers who preach with confidence and authority? When you have a conference, you always see the same names: men who can preach authoritatively. If you want God's best on your ministry, preach with power and authority. But how does one learn to communicate with such power?

In my early days, when I started to prepare a sermon, I got a book of sermons by a famous Texas preacher. I took two of his sermons, along with a couple of his outlines, and I would preach them out loud 10 to 20 times. In my first sermon, in Bostic, Florida, at the Baptist church, I was trembling. I had prepared four sermons. I practiced as I described, until I knew that each one of them would last 40 minutes. I got up and preached all four in 8 minutes! So don't get discouraged, just keep going—work hard. It takes hard work to prepare effective messages. Saturate yourself in the Word of God. Get to the place where you can say, as

Spurgeon said of Ps. 119, "Oh the depths." Pray and pray until you *know* you have God's message. Seek God until you are sure His divine anointing is on you. Actually, your whole life is a preparation to preach. Then, as Spurgeon said, "Take your text and make a beeline for the cross."

Dr. Sid Bonnell said to his class at Princeton, "If you are preaching under the anointing of the Holy Spirit, the hearers will hear another 'Voice.'" No one is ever preaching until the people are conscious of that other "Voice." Are people conscious of that other "Voice" when you preach? Are you Spirit-filled (Eph. 5:18)? Do you preach with His authority? That is absolutely essential to the communication of the gospel. One reason the people listened to Jesus was that He spoke as one having authority.

Preach with authority. When you quote God's Word, He will use it. He will never allow it to return void.

One day my wife was in the famous London bookstore, Foyles. A fellow came out, discouraged and despondent. He said to my wife, "You look like a real Christian. My family's torn up." He said, "I'm on the verge of suicide." She asked, "Well, why not go out to the Harringay Arena tonight and hear Billy Graham?" "Oh," he said, "I don't think he could help me. I'm beyond help." But she gave him some tickets, and he came. She didn't see him for a year. The next year, when we were at Wembley Stadium, she went back to Foyles. That same little fellow came running out. He said, "Oh, Mrs. Graham, that night I went to Harringay and I was converted to Christ. And I'm the happiest person in Britain!" He went on, "The verse your husband preached on that night that God saved me was a verse from the Psalms, "I am like a pelican of the wilderness: I am like an owl of the desert" (Ps. 102:6, KJV). My wife scratched her head and said, "I never thought of that as a gospel verse." But he said, "That verse described me completely and I was saved." You see, God uses His Word. His power is in the Word.

b. Preach the gospel with simplicity. Dr. James S. Stewart, of Edinburgh, said, "You never preach the Gospel unless you preach it with simplicity." He said further, "If you shoot over the heads of your hearers, you don't prove anything except you have a poor aim." We must learn to take the profoundest things of God and proclaim them with simplicity.

In our Berlin Congress on Evangelism in 1966, one of the papers read by an American theologian was deep and involved. Many of the Christians really did not understand what he was talking about. But there was an African there, dressed in his native dress, and he had not been able to make out a thing that the learned professor said. But he

went right up and hugged the speaker and kissed him in front of everybody. And he said, "You know, I don't understand a thing you say, but I'm so glad that a man who knows as much as you know is on our side." The sentiment was great, but we must communicate so that people understand as well. Preach it with simplicity.

I have a friend on the West Coast of America. He is in the Methodist Church. One Sunday before the worship hour, he decided he was going to present some visual education for the children. He decided he would preach his children's sermon with all sorts of slides he had made during the week. This, he thought, would illustrate his simple sermon and help the children understand. To his amazement he found that the older people began to come early until the church was packed to hear his children's sermons, and the attendance at his eleven o'clock service was dropping. He had made that grand discovery that the more simple he made his communication, the more people came to hear. People want simplicity. I am sure that was one of the secrets of the ministry of our Lord. The Bible says, "The common people heard him gladly" (Mark 12:37, KJV). Why? For one central reason. They understood Him. He spoke their language.

c. Preach with *repetition*. Professor James Denney, of Glasgow, once said that Jesus probably repeated himself more than 500 times. That is an encouragement to every evangelist. The gospel may at times seem "old" to us, but repeat and repeat and repeat it. It is "news" to multitudes. Never tire, and never be embarrassed to share the news over and over again.

d. Preach it with *urgency*; preach it for *decision*. People are dying. You may be speaking to some who will hear the gospel for the last time. Preach with the urgency of Christ. Preach it to bring your hearers to Christ. Preach for decision. Preach for a verdict as Jesus did. The call to repentance and faith is part of the proclamation (*kerygma*) too.

e. Never forget, we are to communicate the gospel by a *holy life*. This is essential. Did you know that our world today is looking primarily for men and women of integrity, communicators who back up their ministry with their lives? Your preaching emerges out of what you are. We *must* be a holy people. Those who have affected me most profoundly have not been the great orators. It is those who have been holy men and women. That is where the stress must be placed. Robert Murray Mc-Cheyne said, "A holy man is an awful weapon in God's hand." Paul said, "I keep under my body, and bring it into subjection" (1 Cor. 9:27, KJV).

We must take that seriously. There are three avenues through which

the devil attacks young evangelists (and older preachers too): money, morals, and pride. As ministers of the gospel, you will battle with all three all your life. Be ready. The devil will set traps for you constantly.

When we first started in evangelism, Cliff Barrows and I determined that we were going to incorporate and have a board, and pay ourselves a set salary. It caused a furor. Some said, "You're going to ruin evangelism." But I believe that God has honored the way we've handled the finances. We must never bring reproach on evangelism over money. Evangelists are so vulnerable right there. Be holy!

Nor is a holy life merely negative—"don't do this, or, don't do that." It is positive. You must immerse yourself in the Word of God. You must be a person of prayer. A disciplined devotional life is vital to holy living.

f. We communicate the gospel by our *love of our fellowman*. "All men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (John 13:35). A layperson in Boston went boldly into a hotel, walked up to a lady, and said, "Do you know Christ?" She told her husband about it. Her husband said, "Didn't you tell him to mind his own business?" She replied, "But, my dear, if you'd seen the expression on his face and heard the earnestness with which he spoke, you would have thought it was his business."

When you speak to people about Christ, personally or in preaching, do they think that it is your business? Do you really love people? Does it show? Do they sense your compassion?

One of our associate evangelists was preaching in Central America at the university on one occasion. He tried to win the students to Christ, and they showed him a great deal of hostility. One student was especially hostile. After the service, this girl came up to him (she was working on her doctorate degree), and she said, "I don't believe any of that hogwash." He said, "Well, I don't think I agree; but do you mind if I pray for you?" She said, "No one ever prayed for me before. I don't guess it will do any harm." He bowed his head, but she looked straight ahead and was defiant when he started to pray. As he prayed for the conversion of that girl, the tears began to flow down his cheeks. When he opened his eyes, she was broken up with tears and said, "No one in my whole life has loved me enough to shed a tear for me." They sat down on a bench and that girl accepted the Lord as her Savior. How many of us have loved so much that we have shed tears?

g. We communicate the gospel by a compassionate *social concern*. This is implied in the love we are to show to others. You may ask, "Billy, do you believe in the social gospel?" Of course I do. I believe that there is

a social involvement incumbent and commanded in the Scripture. Look at our Lord. He touched the leper. Can you imagine what that touch meant to that leper, ostracized forever, until his death, who had to cry constantly, “Unclean! Unclean!” Yet, Jesus touched him. Jesus was teaching by example as well as by precept that we have a responsibility to the oppressed, the sick, the poor (Luke 4:18-19). When I think of the starving millions, I can hardly eat my food. This year alone, in Ethiopia, 100,000 people will die of thirst—not hunger—just thirst. They can’t get even water, let alone food. And that’s only one part of the world.

I was told by one of our economic experts, “We’re one crop away from a massive world famine that will affect even the United States.” The world is headed toward a gigantic crisis of food. Are we concerned? Our association sends thousands of dollars each year to help. Yes, I believe in a “social gospel.” I love people. We are to have a compassionate social concern.

Furthermore, I am not going to apologize for the accusation that Evangelicals throughout the world have done little or nothing in this area. We all have to admit that many of us have not done our share—we have not done enough. It is also wrong to condemn all Evangelicals as having little or no social concern. We have only to think of historical figures like John Wesley, Charles Finney, William Booth, Jonathan Blanchard (the founder of Wheaton College, which has been called the “Harvard” of evangelical education), or Martin Luther King (who came from an evangelical background). We must admit though, that we have not done nearly enough. We have too often been silent in the face of critical social issues.

For two or three generations, when the so-called fundamentalist-modernist controversy was raging in the early 1920s, the reaction by certain groups (even foreign missionary organizations) against the so-called social gospel became so great that they pulled into a shell and gave the Evangelical movement a bad reputation concerning social involvement. For the past few years, a drastic change has been taking place; and there are fine Evangelicals in many parts of the world in the forefront of social change. Go to Nigeria, for example. Four thousand schools have been established there by people who are motivated by the gospel of Jesus Christ.

But never forget, the church goes into the world with an extra dimension in its social concern. We go in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. We reach out to meet needs and give, but we must always say, “Given in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.” That is our motivation.

And we can often use that means as a vehicle that they can see Christ in us. Therefore, it never becomes mere humanitarianism. We give because God gave.

When I met the former prime minister of Britain, Harold Wilson, he shook hands with me and said, “Oh, yes, we come by your way.” I knew what he meant. Keir Hardie helped found the British Labour Party. He had been profoundly influenced by the ministry of evangelist Dwight L. Moody. Keir Hardie was an evangelist all his life, as well as having been deeply involved in helping and organizing the working poor. He founded the British Labour Party because of his social concern, out of love for Christ. And Prime Minister Wilson was a member of that British Labour Party.

When Martin Luther King accepted his Nobel Peace Prize in Stockholm, they asked him, “Where do you get your motivation?” He said, “From my father’s evangelistic preaching.”

h. We communicate the gospel by our *unity in the Spirit*. How vital it is to realize that if we can stay unified, yet also realize that there is diversity in unity, we can turn the world upside down for Christ. We have the instruments in our hands right now to evangelize the world before the end of this century. For the first time in the history of the Christian Church, the possibility of fulfilling the Great Commission is in our grasp. What an hour! But we must all work together in the “unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace” (Eph. 4:3). This is our task, and this is our job.

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