A Challenge For Christian Communicators
Scripture: 1 Corinthians 9:19-22; 2 Corinthians 4:1-5; 2 Timothy 4:2
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Clarity and accuracy in communicating divine truth is more important for Christian communicators than anyone else. The availability of mass communications further enhances the preacher's job in this day and time because of the vast audiences he can reach, which were not nearly as large in earlier days. Mass media opportunities can be abused, however, as they have been in so many cases. Television, for example, helped to usher out the "age of exposition" and usher in the age of "sound bites" when image became more important than substance in the message being communicated. As an entertainment medium, television has lowered appetites for serious thought as it has raised expectations for trivia and brevity. That is especially true of sermons in the mass media. Christian publishing has gone in the same direction in catering to people's "felt needs" and giving them something they want rather than the doctrinal truths of the Bible. That is the very thing that Paul warned Timothy against and that Jeremiah refrained from doing. As Christ's ambassadors, Christian communicators must make the message, not the medium, the heart of what they give their listeners, viewers, and readers.

Importance of Clear Communication

No preacher likes the feeling of being tongue-tied—especially when it happens in the pulpit. Those awkward moments when his brain gets stuck in neutral and his mouth continues to rev are the nightmare of every preacher. It can be especially dangerous when everything he says is taped.

A few years ago some of our radio-broadcast workers assembled a taped collection of all my verbal fumbles over the years. They collected about fifteen-years worth of out-takes and strung them together to make an entire sermon of nonsense. It was painful to listen to.

So I have nothing but extreme pity for the Reverend William Archibald Spooner, who suffered from a disability that no preacher deserves. Spooner was a brilliant man who was dean of New College, Oxford, at the turn of the twentieth century. Today he is chiefly remembered because he elevated slips of the tongue to an art form. He was particularly prone to one variety of verbal blunder that has been given his name—the spoonerism. A spoonerism transposes the syllables or sounds of two or more words, as in "Let me sew you to your sheet."

Spooner's backward eloquence was unsurpassed. Reprimanding a wayward student, he uttered these immortal words: “You have hissed all my mystery lectures; I saw you fight a liar on the college grounds; in fact, you have tasted the whole worm!” It is easy to see how this tendency could adversely affect a preaching ministry. Spooner’s tendency to transpose sounds occasionally caused him to say the very opposite of what he intended. Once when he was performing a wedding, Reverend Spooner told the bridegroom, “It is kisstomary to cuss the bride.” On another occasion Spooner was preaching on Psalm 23, and he assured his congregation that “our Lord is a shoving leopard.” When you realize that Spooner’s ministry was primarily among students, you have to give him high marks for fortitude.

No communicator wants to mangle the message. But for Christian communicators the need to get the message right is elevated to the height of a sacred duty. Perhaps one can smile and pardon an affliction like William Spooner’s, but he certainly cannot tolerate any distortion of divine truth that results from traits such as sloppy thinking, laziness, carelessness, apathy, or indifference. More sinister yet is the tendency to sidestep elements of truth or water down the message because of a desire to please people, a love of worldly praise, or a lack of holy courage.

New Media Opportunities

If anything, the obligation to communicate the truth of the gospel clearly and accurately weighs more heavily on our generation than on those who have gone before us, because our opportunities are so much greater. Luke 12:48 says, “From everyone who has been given much shall much be required.”

No previous generation has been blessed with the means of mass communication like ours. A hundred years ago, “Christian communication” consisted almost totally of preaching sermons and writing books. The only form of mass communication was the press. It never occurred to men like Charles Spurgeon that the means would exist to transmit live sounds and images via satellite to every nation in the world. Spurgeon was the most listened-to preacher in history by the end of the nineteenth century. He preached to huge crowds in his church. By some estimates, four million people actually heard him preach over a remarkable lifetime of ministry.

But today, via radio, Chuck Swindoll preaches to more people than that in a typical week. J. Vernon McGee (“he being dead yet speaketh”) has been broadcasting every weekday worldwide for decades. If you count the sermons that are translated and preached in other languages, McGee has undoubtedly preached to more people than any other person in history—and he continues to do so from the grave.

The staff who produce our recordings and radio broadcasts like to remind me that the sun never sets on our ministry. At any given moment of the day or night, worldwide and around the clock, someone,

somewhere is listening to a sermon I preached from our church pulpit. I cannot tell you how heavily that responsibility continually weighs on me. I am constantly aware of the obligation to get the message right, to speak it clearly, and to proclaim it with authority and conviction.

New vistas in communications are constantly opening up. Future generations will be able to download from a central databank video images and sounds of today's preachers. If tomorrow's Bible students want to know what James Boice said about Romans 7, they will not have to get his commentary and look it up. If they prefer, they will plug into the digital communications superhighway and hear or view the original sermon as he preached it from the pulpit.

Satellite technology, digital sound, high-resolution, wide-screen television are already available. Other high-tech advances suggest that a hundred years from now, communications will have advanced at least as far beyond today's technology as our world has come since Spurgeon's time. If the Lord delays His return, our great-great grandchildren may have access to forms of communication that we cannot even imagine today.

Misused Opportunities

This is a very exciting age in which to live and minister. But remember Luke 12:48: "From everyone who has been given much shall much be required." We are stewards who will be held accountable for the opportunities with which the Lord has blessed us. And if we are honest, I think we would have to confess that the church for the most part has simply squandered the rich opportunities modern communication technology has given. Our generation, with greater means than ever to reach the world with the gospel, is actually losing ground spiritually. The church's influence is actually diminishing. Our message is becoming confused—and it is confusing. We are not speaking the truth plainly for the world to hear the message.

Part of the problem is that the church has failed to see the pitfalls inherent in modern communications. The new technology has brought much more than new opportunities; it has also brought a whole new set of challenges for those whose goal is to proclaim and teach the truth of God. Most of the new media are better suited to entertainment.

Neil Postman wrote an important book some years ago, titled, Amusing Ourselves to Death.[(1)] Every Christian communicator should be familiar with this book. Postman is not a Christian. He teaches communications at New York University. He writes from the perspective of a secular academician. His book is an analysis of how modern communications technology—and television in particular—has dramatically altered our culture.

Postman points out that prior to television, society relied on printed media for most of its information. People had to be literate—not merely able to read and write, but able to think logically, able to digest

information meaningfully, able to engage their minds in all kinds of rational processes. The content of any form of communication took priority over the form. Communicators were chiefly concerned with substance, not style. The message had to have cognitive content.

Postman refers to the age prior to the twentieth century as “the age of exposition.” Human discourse in the age of exposition was significantly different. The Lincoln-Douglas debates, for example, took place in rural communities, in the open air, often in sweltering heat, without the benefit of public address systems. Yet thousands of people stood and listened for hours, carefully following the logic of the debaters, listening intently to profound dialogue, hanging on every word of two eloquent speakers.

By contrast, today’s politicians compete for “sound bites.” Image is more important than substance. America now selects presidential candidates the way Hollywood auditions actors. In fact, prior to Bill Clinton, the only president in forty years to complete two terms was an actor (Ronald Reagan).

A major shift took place, according to Postman, “Toward the end of the nineteenth century. . . . The Age of Exposition began to pass, and the early signs of its replacement could be discerned. Its replacement was to be the Age of Show Business.”

Media-Modified Message

Television has done more than anything else to define the age of show business. We tend to think of television as a significant tool in the advancement of knowledge. Through the eye of the television camera, we can witness events on the other side of the globe—or even on the moon—as they are unfolding. We see and hear things our ancestors could never have imagined. Surely we should be the best-informed and most knowledgeable generation in history.

But the effect of television has been precisely the opposite. Television has not made us more literate than our ancestors. Instead, it has flooded our minds with irrelevant and meaningless information. We are experts in the trivia of pop culture, but are ignorant about serious matters. The publicity surrounding the O. J. Simpson murder trial in 1995 illustrates this. During Simpson’s preliminary hearing, a severe crisis over nuclear weapons was unfolding in Korea. The government of Haiti was overthrown by a coup and an entire nation thrown into chaos. Yassir Arafat returned to the Gaza strip legally for the first time in decades, marking one of the most significant modern political developments in the Middle East. The prime minister of Nepal resigned. All those things of earth-shaking importance were happening in the world, yet in spite of their significance, our local television newscasts devoted 93 percent of their coverage to the Simpson hearing.

Television is an entertainment medium. Too much television has fed people’s appetite for entertainment and lowered their tolerance for serious thought. Now even the print media are following

television's lead, and formatting their content so that it is more entertaining than informative. In England, the tabloids have all but driven serious newspapers out of business. USA Today was founded to achieve a similar purpose. It was consciously designed and formatted to reach the TV generation. The stories are purposely short. Only the main front-page articles are carried over to another page. It is an entire newspaper of sound-bite information, formatted for a generation whose minds have been shaped by television. And commercially it has been a tremendous success.

Book publishing is following suit. Look at a recent New York Times bestseller list. Seven of the top books were cartoon collections—"Garfield," "The Far Side," and similar fare. The top nonfiction books included some photographic essays and works by Dave Barry, Rush Limbaugh, and Howard Stern. Only three of the top books on the nonfiction list had any substantial non-humorous content. What does this say about our society?

Television has not only lowered tolerance for serious thought; it has also dulled minds to reality. As the O. J. Simpson drama was unfolding, one network followed the sensational freeway chase scene by helicopter but kept a small window at the bottom of the screen where the NBA playoffs were being shown. The two scenes were utterly incongruous.

But even apart from the O. J. Simpson story, network news is surreal. The evening news is a performance, where suave anchormen coolly read brief reports about war, murder, crime, and natural disaster. Commercials that trivialize the stories and isolate them from any context punctuate these stories. Neil Postman recounts a news broadcast in which a Marine Corps general declared that global nuclear war is inevitable. The next segment was a commercial for Burger King.

We are not expected to respond rationally. In Postman's words, "The viewers will not be caught contaminating their responses with a sense of reality, any more than an audience at a play would go scurrying to call home because a character on stage has said that a murderer is loose in the neighborhood."[(2)]

Television cannot demand a sensible response. People tune in to be entertained, not to be challenged to think. If a program requires contemplation or demands too much use of the intellect, no one watches.

Television has also lowered attention spans. After fifteen minutes, we get a break for commercials. One of the cable networks even has a program called "Short-Attention-Span Theater." On every network, programs require a minimum intellectual involvement. Most television dramas are designed for an intellectual capacity of the average seven-year-old. The point is not to challenge viewers, but to amuse them. Neil Postman says we are amusing ourselves to death. He suggests that our fascination with television has sapped our culture's intellectual and spiritual stamina.

In fact, his most trenchant message is in a chapter on modern religion. Postman is Jewish, but he writes with piercing insight about the decline of preaching in the Christian church. He contrasts the ministries of Jonathan Edwards and George Whitefield with the preaching of today. Those men relied on depth of content, profundity, logic, and knowledge of the Scriptures. Preaching today is superficial by comparison, with the emphasis on style and emotion. “Good” preaching by the modern definition must above all be brief and amusing. Much that passes for preaching these days is merely entertainment—devoid of any exhortation, reproof, rebuke, or instruction (cf. 2 Timothy 3:16, 4:2).

The epitome of modern preaching is the slick evangelist who overstates every emotion, carries a microphone as he struts around the platform, and gets the audience clapping, stomping, and shouting while he incites them into a frenzy. The message has no meat, but who cares as long as the response is enthusiastic?

It is not only a few televangelists who fall into this category. Some of our most conservative, evangelical churches have allowed entertainment to replace the clear preaching of truth. Where preaching can be found, it is often devoid of doctrine, filled with clever anecdotes and sound-bite witticisms. Biblical preaching with real content is in a serious state of decline.

Felt-Need Communication

Christian publishing has dutifully followed the trends. A certain publishing company has been in business for nearly a hundred years, publishing very solid Christian literature. But not too long ago they completely shut down their textbook division and announced that their new focus would be on publishing books that could easily cross over into the secular market. They were looking for self-help books, humor books, and other lightweight material with a minimum of biblical references.

That is precisely the wrong direction to go. We who have access to the divinely inspired truth of God’s Word should be confronting the apathy and foolishness of a society that is addicted to entertainment and ignorant of truth. We should be shouting truth from the rooftops, not adapting our message to the shallow and insipid amusements that have left our society morally and intellectually bankrupt.

Living in an age that has abandoned the quest for truth, the church cannot afford to be vacillating. We minister to people in desperate need of a word from the Lord, and we cannot soft-pedal our message or extenuate the gospel. If we make friends with the world, we set ourselves at enmity with God. If we trust worldly devices, we automatically relinquish the power of the Holy Spirit.

I am very concerned about the modern church’s fascination with marketing methodology. I wrote a book, Ashamed of the Gospel,[(3)] which analyzed and critiqued the modern church’s tendency to rely on Madison Avenue technique. Too many are trying to sell the gospel as a product rather than

understanding that the gospel itself is the power of God to change people's hearts and minds.

My challenge to pastors and to writers is the same. The task of every Christian communicator is the same. It is not only to entertain. It is not merely to amuse. It is not just to sell a product. It is certainly not to increase audience approval ratings. The task is to communicate God's truth as clearly, as effectively, and as accurately as possible.

Often this is incompatible with marketing goals. Why? Have you ever noticed how many television commercials say nothing about the products they advertise? The typical jeans commercial shows a painful drama about the woes of adolescence, but does not mention jeans. A perfume ad is a collage of sensuous images with no reference to the product. Beer commercials contain some of the funniest material on television, but say very little about beer.

Those commercials are supposed to create a mood, to entertain, to appeal to emotions—not to give information. An obvious parallel exists between such commercials and some of the trends in Christian communications. Like the commercials, many Christian communicators, whether preachers or writers, aim to set a mood, to evoke an emotional response, to entertain—but not necessarily to ommunicate anything of substance.

Others, using the best techniques of modern marketing, purposely frame the message so that it appeals to people's desire for happiness, prosperity, and self-gratification. The goal is to give people what they want. Advocates of a market-driven communications philosophy are quite candid about this. Consumer satisfaction is the stated goal of the new philosophy. One key resource on market-driven ministry says, "This is what marketing the [Christian message] is all about: providing our product . . . as a solution to people's felt need."

"Felt needs" thus determine the road map for the modern communicator's marketing plan. The idea is a basic marketing principle: you satisfy an existing desire rather than trying to persuade people to buy something they do not want. Such trends are sheer accommodation to a society bred by television. They follow what is fashionable but reveal little concern for what is true. They cater to the very worst tendencies in modern society. They humor people whose first love is themselves. They offer people God without any disruption of their selfish lifestyles.

Biblical Communication

And if results are what you want, here is a sure way to get them. Promise people a religion that will allow them to be comfortable in their materialism and self-love, and they will respond in droves. But that is not effective Christian communication. In fact, it is precisely the kind of thing Paul warned Timothy to avoid.

Paul commanded Timothy, “Preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction” (2 Timothy 4:2). The apostle included this prophetic warning: “The time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires; and will turn away their ears from the truth, and will turn aside to myths” (2 Timothy 4:3-4). The King James Version translates the passage like this: “After their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears; and they shall turn away their ears from the truth.”

Clearly Paul’s philosophy of ministry had no room for the give-people what-they-want theory of modern marketing. He did not urge Timothy to conduct a survey to find out what his people wanted. He did not suggest that he study demographic data or do research on the “felt needs” of his people. He commanded him to preach the Word—faithfully, reprovingly, patiently—and confront the spirit of the age head on.

Notice that Paul said nothing to Timothy about how people might respond. He did not lecture Timothy on how large his church was, how much money it took in, or how influential it was. He did not suggest that the world was supposed to revere, esteem, or even accept Timothy. In fact, Paul said nothing whatever about external success. Paul’s emphasis was on faithfulness, not success.

In stark contrast, modern marketing experts are telling Christian communicators to find out what people want, then do whatever is necessary to meet the most popular demands. The audience is “sovereign” in such matters. One best-selling book on Christian marketing actually states that the audience should determine how to frame a message:

It is . . . critical that we keep in mind a fundamental principle of Christian communication: the audience, not the message, is sovereign. If our advertising is going to stoppeople in the midst of hectic schedules and cause them to think about what we’re saying, our message has to be adapted to the needs of the audience. When we produce advertising that is based on the take-it-or-leave-it proposition, rather than on a sensitivity and response to people’s needs, people will invariably reject our message.[(4)]

What if the OT prophets had subscribed to such a philosophy? Jeremiah, for example, preached forty years without seeing any significant positive response. On the contrary, his countrymen threatened to kill him if he did not stop prophesying (Jeremiah 11:19-23); his own family and friends plotted against him (Jeremiah 12:6); he was not permitted to marry, and so had to suffer agonizing loneliness (Jeremiah 16:2); plots were devised to kill him secretly (Jeremiah 18:20-23); he was beaten and put in stocks (Jeremiah 20:1-2); he was spied on by friends who sought revenge (Jeremiah 20:10); he was consumed with sorrow and shame—even having the day he was born cursed (Jeremiah 20:14-18); and falsely accused of being a traitor to the nation (Jeremiah 37:13-14). Jeremiah was then

beaten, thrown into a dungeon, and starved many days (Jeremiah 37:15-21). If an Ethiopian Gentile had not interceded on his behalf, Jeremiah would have died there. In the end, tradition says he was exiled to Egypt, where he was stoned to death by his own people. He had virtually no converts to show for a lifetime of ministry.

Suppose Jeremiah had attended a modern communications seminar and learned a market-driven philosophy of communications. Do you think he would have changed his style of confrontational ministry? Can you imagine him staging a variety show or using comedy to try to win people's affections? He may have learned to gather an appreciative crowd, but he certainly would not have had the ministry to which God called him.

Contrast Jeremiah's commitment with the advice of a modern marketing expert. An author who insists that the audience is sovereign suggests that the wise communicator ought to "shape his communications according to [people's] needs in order to receive the response he [seeks]."[(5)] The effect of that philosophy is apparent; Christian communicators are becoming people-pleasers—precisely what Scripture forbids.

The whole strategy is backward. The audience is not sovereign, God is. And His truth is unchanging. His Word is forever settled in heaven. Though new forms of media may come and go, the message itself cannot be changed. To change the biblical message in any way is expressly forbidden. We cannot truncate it, water it down, sugar-coat it, or otherwise minimize the offense of the cross.

Someone will inevitably point out that Paul said he became all things to all men that he might by all means win some. But Paul was not proposing that the message be changed or softened. Paul refused either to amend or to abridge his message to make people happy. He wrote, "Am I now seeking the favor of men, or of God? Or am I striving to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a bond-servant of Christ" (Galatians 1:10, emphasis added). He was utterly unwilling to try to remove the offense from the gospel (Galatians 5:11). He did not use methodology that catered to the lusts of his listeners. He certainly did not follow the kind of pragmatic philosophy of modern, market-driven communicators.

What made Paul effective was not marketing savvy, but a stubborn devotion to the truth. He saw himself as Christ's ambassador, not His press secretary. Truth was something to be declared, not negotiated. Paul was not ashamed of the gospel (Romans 1:16). He willingly suffered for the truth's sake (2 Corinthians 11:23-28). He did not back down in the face of opposition or rejection. He did not adjust the truth to make unbelievers happy. He did not make friends with the enemies of God.

Paul's message was always non-negotiable. In the same chapter where he spoke of becoming all things to all men, Paul wrote, "I am under compulsion; for woe is me if I do not preach the gospel" (1 Corinthians 9:16). His ministry was in response to a divine mandate. God had called him and

commissioned him. Paul preached the gospel exactly as he had received it directly from the Lord, and he always delivered that message “as of first importance” (1 Cor 15:3). He was not a salesman or marketer, but a divine emissary. He certainly was not “willing to shape his communications” to accommodate his listeners or produce a desirable response. The fact that he was stoned and left for dead (Acts 14:9), beaten, imprisoned, and finally killed for the truth’s sake ought to demonstrate that he did not adapt the message to make it pleasing to his hearers! And the personal suffering he bore because of his ministry did not indicate that something was wrong with his approach, but that everything had been right!

As Christian communicators we must commit ourselves to being what God has called us to be. We are not carnival barkers, used-car salesmen, or commercial pitchmen. We are Christ’s ambassadors (2 Corinthians 5:20). Knowing the terror of the Lord (2 Corinthians 5:11), motivated by the love of Christ (2 Corinthians 5:14), utterly made new by Him (2 Corinthians 5:17), we implore sinners to be reconciled to God (2 Corinthians 5:20).

Use the Media Without Abusing the Message

I believe we can be innovative and creative in how we present the gospel, but we have to be careful that our methods harmonize with the profound spiritual truth we are trying to convey. It is too easy to trivialize the sacred message. We must make the message, not the medium, the heart of what we want to convey to the audience.

As Christian writers and communicators, I challenge you to forget what is fashionable and concern yourself with what is true. Do not be quick to embrace the trends of modern marketing. Certainly we should use the new media. But rather than adapting our message to suit the medium, let’s use the medium to present the message as clearly, as accurately, and as fully as possible. If we are faithful in that, the soil God has prepared will bear fruit. His Word will not return void.

*The following, a previously unpublished address given by President MacArthur at a Christian Communicators’ Conference a number of years ago, has been edited for use in The Master’s Seminary Journal.

1 (New York: Penguin Books, 1986).

2 Cited in George Barna, Marketing the Church (Colorado Springs, Colo.: NavPress, 1988) 145 (emphasis added).

3 (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 1993).

4 Barna, Marketing the Church 145 (emphasis added).

5 Ibid., 33.

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