

Wherever God puts you, the message is the same: the wonder of the gospel, spoken simply and clearly, in your own voice, to your close-in audience.

The Gospel's Best Communicator



By Jeff Hopper

AS GOLF FANS, we are almost always drawn to the big names first. Needle-movers, they are often called. They play in the featured groups, draw the largest galleries, and gain the most attention during television broadcasts. And we expect them to win—more trophies, more majors, more money, more endorsements.

When an underdog arises now and then, we're OK with it. It shows us anyone can get the job done if the course suits them, the draw is right, and their putts fall. You never know.

Business, too, has its champions. Whether we pluck the Rockefellers or the Stanfords from the past, or point our fingers at Elon Musk, Bill Gates, or Larry Page and Sergey Brin today, we're going to lean in the direction of the billionaires first. How did they get it done? Is there a secret sauce we can spread over our own meager efforts and hope for some traction in these little endeavors of ours?

Now what about when it comes to the landscape of Christian effort? Should we still be looking to the names we all know, past and present? Maybe preachers like Jonathan Edwards or Charles Spurgeon catch your attention. Perhaps it is the famous missionaries, like Hudson Taylor, Eric Liddell, or Amy Carmichael. Or you're thinking of evangelists along the lines of Billy Graham or Luis Palau.

This latter question is more important than it seems, because if we are to succeed at the business of sowing the seeds of the gospel, then we want to get people in front of the most effective communicators of all. In fact, you may have been taught that the best reason to get your friends to church is so they can hear the preacher—the one with the gospel goods—preach. But what if I told you that the most effective, most important person most people you know will meet when it comes to communicating the gospel is you? Would this excite you like never before or scare you to death?

The gospel

Let's begin with a reminder of what the gospel is.

The gospel in its most literal scriptural sense means "good news." Now the good news that different people are looking for in their lives may vary. We've written about this in another article called, "What News

is Good News?" But there is also a universal basis to the gospel. In its simplest form, it can be stated like this:

I can't. God can.

To remind you of what this means with a little more meat on those bones, let's provide some biblical underpinning.

First, God created a perfect world, without sin. Into this world, he created man and woman, Adam and Eve, and gave them one rule: do not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Although this first couple lived in an Edenic setting—literally!—and every other option was given to them, they chose to listen to the dissenting voice of the enemy, Satan, and they ate the forbidden fruit. They sinned.

This sin caused a separation from God and his perfect plan for them. It has done the same for us. Theologians don't always agree on whether it is Adam and Eve's sin that has been passed down to us in a form of spiritual genetics (the doctrine of original sin), but they agree on this: no one since Adam and Eve, other than Jesus, has been able to live a sinless life. Our own sins have disqualified us from God's perfect plan, too.

So what was to be done? If we cannot get to a perfect God on the basis of our own perfect living, is there any hope for us at all? This is where the bad news turns to good news. Blood atones for (or washes away) sin. In the Old Testament law, various blood sacrifices of birds and livestock were put in place for the purpose of temporary atonement. But all the while, God's prophecies pointed to a greater plan: a Messiah, or Savior, would come, and by his blood a once-for-all atoning sacrifice would be made through his death.

This Messiah was Jesus, and his

death on the cross shed the unblemished blood necessary for us to be cleansed of our sin and justified in God's eyes. More surprisingly, perhaps, his resurrection from the dead, also opened the door to eternal life for all who believe and follow him.

That's it. The gospel. The story of what we cannot do but what God has done for us. It's not a long story, so it's one we should all be able to tell. More than this, it is one we should be telling as often as possible, to as many as will listen.

The apostle Paul asked the Roman readers of his letter to them how anyone can hear the good news of Jesus unless there are those going out to share it.

And that is where we come back to our opening question: Who is best equipped to share this news—to preach or evangelize or be a missionary? And we really do think the answer is you.

Lessons from communication theory

To help us explore the reason for our thinking, let's turn to some elementary understanding of communication theory. And with the help of Christian anthropologist and linguist Charles Kraft, we'll apply this theory to the communication of the gospel. Dr. Kraft first explored these ideas in his 1979 book, *Communicating the Gospel God's Way*, which he revised 20 years later as *Communicating Jesus' Way*. In both books, he offers a grid of typology of approaches to communication. Even if you have never thought about communication theory before, your own experiences will allow this to make sense to you rather quickly.

Let's begin by recognizing together that certain types of information are best suited for delivery in large groups. For instance, if you take a friend to church this weekend and even as few as 50-100 people

are sitting in the service, the pastor will be teaching to the audience that he presumes fills this room—that is, people who already have some understanding of how to find their way around the Bible, people who know what terms like salvation and spiritual growth and the Great Commission mean. Oh, and the pastor would not in a congregational setting of this size expect to be interrupted with questions or comments from the audience. And of course, if the church is much larger, this applies all the more.

to ask you questions without feeling like others he does not know are scrutinizing his lack of knowledge or personal problems?

Drawing from Dr. Kraft’s grid, we can quickly reinforce what we have just seen in our mini-case studies:

- Large-group, monolog approaches are source dominant; one-on-one personal conversations are receptor prominent.
- In large-group, monolog approaches, reinforcement and

Kraft calls the one-on-one approach “life involvement.” That means that the receptor (your friend!) is exposed not just to words but to everything they see in you. In their book, *Contagious Disciple-Making: Leading Others on a Journey of Discovery*, missiologists and church planters David Watson and Paul Watson emphasize this idea, when they write:

Equipping requires us to be in relationship with those we are discipling. In equipping, we



We ‘redeem the time’ for the purpose of sowing gospel seeds and building discipling relationships.

But what if you took your friend instead to a Links Fellowship or similar small group, where there are maybe only 15 or 20 people in the room? In the beginning, your friend might still be reticent to participate at a conversational level, but he or she would quickly recognize that this is happening in the group. Individual’s questions are asked and the teacher or facilitator answers or allows others to answer or offers to come back next week having explored the answer. In this setting, the give-and-take of communication is greatly increased.

Now let’s go one step further. After church or small group meeting, let’s say that you and your friend go together to grab a cup of coffee, or you hop in a golf cart and share a round of golf. How much greater is the room for conversation now? How much easier is it for your friend

retention are low; in one-on-one personal conversations, reinforcement and retention are high.

- In large-group, monolog approaches, little discovery by the receptor is possible because the message is pre-digested; but in one-on-one personal conversations, we find maximum opportunity for feedback and adjustment and thus maximum opportunity for discovery by the receptor.

You can quickly ascertain that small group settings offer a middle road on this spectrum. Some dialog is possible, allowing for greater retention and discovery than a monolog approach, though probably not as high as in a one-on-one setting. You might be interested to know that

engage in more than just classroom or teaching/training time. The equipper [you] and the equipped [your friend] become a part of each other’s lives.... The ones we are discipling should be able to drop in on us at any time and find us faithful and obedient to all the teachings of Christ.

Admittedly, this is a demanding scenario. Kraft recognizes the far greater claim on our time that the one-on-one model requires. The Watsons recognize the far greater claim on one’s character when we let people get this close to us. Maybe, though, this is why God has brought you to the recreational world of golf, where most of us have the luxury of extended time to spend with others. We are positioned in a way that others aren’t, so we might “redeem

the time” for the purpose of sowing gospel seeds and building discipling relationships.

Ministering from the middle

Our long-time friend Tim Philpot, a retired family court judge and active evangelist who has spent a lifetime in golf, turns to one of Paul’s pastoral letters as the impetus for putting himself in groups that require him to be both communicator and communicatee. Here is the passage:

And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable people who will also be qualified to teach others. (2 Timothy 2:2)

Partly because it borrows from the verse’s reference and partly because it rolls of the tongue so well, Tim calls these “2-T-2-2 groups.” The principle behind the verse is that the work of ministry is generational, spiritually speaking.

- Paul first taught Timothy
- Timothy heard these words and entrusted them to reliable people
- These people in turn taught others

What Tim (and many others) are saying is that we all need a Paul or a Timothy in our lives, teaching us “from above” and we all need reliable people or others “below us,” whose lives we too are impacting by sharing our daily lives with them. We don’t make a habit of passing these people up the chain—we are their “up the chain”! These aren’t only words to Tim, either. This self-admitted small group junkie has made an intentional habit of meeting regularly with groups of men whose ranks include those 10 and 15 years older (men in their 80s and 90s), as well as with

groups of much younger men who are coming up through the same career ranks he did and who need help making sense of how to follow Jesus as attorneys and businessmen.

Surely you can see yourself in this. You may have a place among men or women, golfers or non-golfers, attorneys or contractors or financial planners or school teachers. You may have an open door among moms or dads or both together. You and your wife may be perfectly suited to speak into others’ lives about marriage in all joy and struggle. This is the positioning—and maybe even the calling—God has given you. But in all of these settings, the message is the same: the wonder of the gospel, spoken simply and clearly, in your own voice, to your close-in audience.

First steps

By this point, any article writer hopes you have made the transition from understanding to connection. You’re convinced that the charge is authentic and you’re asking yourself, “How do you I take up applying this to my life?” If you’re there, let’s give you three little steps to set you on your way.

1. *Prayer.* Ask the Lord in your personal time of prayer to help you see your present positioning among others in your club or other places of contact as your “pulpit,” from where you will communicate the gospel. And make this a request you ask of your mentors and Fellowship as well—that they would pray for your availability to be increased and your witness to be open.

2. *Learn conversation-changing questions.* Having transitional questions in mind can help us change the conversation from everyday talk to the topics that matter. One Links Player, when recognizing playing partners get frustrated, would say, “You were pretty upset back there.

What do you do when that happens to you in life—because it used to happen to me and I had to find another way to deal with things.” Another attention-grabber when the conversation turns to the future goes like this: “Where will you be a hundred years from now?” That question sure challenges priorities, and it always uncovers whether a person has an assurance of salvation.

3. *Add to your scriptural readiness.* Take some time to steep yourself in Scriptures that can help you outline the basics of the gospel. Traditional paths through Scripture, like the Romans Road (Google it for several helpful resources). A more complete primer recently written is *The Whole Story of the Bible in 16 Verses*, by Chris Bruno. Of course, having a strong handle on at least one of the four Gospels will allow you to bring Jesus into any conversation—and for all the hang-ups people may have with the church or Christians they have met, most still have a fascination and respect for Jesus.

In the end, you can see that not only are you positioned right where you are now to be an effective, meaningful communicator of the gospel, when you remember that this is “the power of God that brings salvation” (Romans 1:16), you also will be enthused for the task. You’re not just talking with others about their daily lives but about how those lives fit into all of eternity. You’re not just introducing them to a better communicator; as an effective communicator yourself, you’re introducing them to the very one who can change their heart and give them a life with him that never ends. ■■■

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