The Stairway to Heaven: a Critique of the Evangelical Gospel Presentation in North America

Paul Brent Dybdahl

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Andrews University
Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary

THE STAIRWAY TO HEAVEN: A CRITIQUE OF THE EVANGELICAL GOSPEL PRESENTATION IN NORTH AMERICA

A Dissertation
Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree Doctor of Philosophy

by
Paul Brent Dybdahl
January 2004
ABSTRACT

THE STAIRWAY TO HEAVEN: A CRITIQUE OF THE
EVANGELICAL GOSPEL PRESENTATION
IN NORTH AMERICA

by

Paul Brent Dybdahl

Adviser: Nancy J. Vyhmeister
ABSTRACT OF GRADUATE STUDENT RESEARCH

Dissertation

Andrews University

Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary

Title: THE STAIRWAY TO HEAVEN: A CRITIQUE OF THE EVANGELICAL GOSPEL PRESENTATION IN NORTH AMERICA

Name of researcher: Paul Brent Dybdahl

Name and degree of faculty adviser: Nancy J. Vyhmeister, Ed.D.

Date completed: January 2004

The Topic

This study focuses on the so-called “plan of salvation” or “gospel presentation” that evangelical Christians in the United States present to seekers who want to know how to be saved. There are currently three dominant presentations that are widely employed and emulated. The authors of each are well-known: D. James Kennedy, Bill Bright, and Billy Graham.

The major portion of my study involves a two-stage critique of these dominant evangelical gospel presentations: first, from the perspective provided by communication theory, and second, by comparing the presentations of Kennedy, Bright, and Graham with conversion accounts from Luke-Acts. Essentially, I ask if the evangelical presentation is
understood by Americans and if it is supported by conversion pericopes in Luke-Acts.

The Conclusions

My research indicates that the dominant evangelical gospel presentation, developed in the 1960s, largely ignores the insights provided by communication theory in that it fails to adequately understand the contemporary American audience it attempts to reach. In short, it does not communicate with maximum effectiveness.

I also demonstrate that the conversion accounts in Luke-Acts present a way of salvation that is quite different from, and in some cases, contradictory to the evangelical plan of salvation in America. I then use these Lukan conversion accounts as a basis for suggesting how evangelicals might better present the way of salvation to North Americans today.
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by

Paul Brent Dybdahl

APPROVAL BY THE COMMITTEE:

Nancy Vyhmeister
Faculty Adviser,
Nancy J. Vyhmeister
Professor of Mission, Emerita

Walter B. T. Douglas
Professor of Church History and History of Religion

W. Larry Richards
Professor of New Testament Exegesis, Emeritus

Kenneth B. Stout
Professor of Preaching

Art McPhee
Associate Professor of Mission and Intercultural Studies
Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary

April 23, 2009
Date approved

Roy E. Gane
Director, Ph.D./Th.D. Program
Roy E. Gane
Dean, SDA Theological Seminary
John K. McVay
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Background of the Problem

Social scientists and philosophers assert that a fundamental cultural shift is occurring in the Western world. The precise terminology used to define this shift is still open to debate, but the most common description speaks of a change from a “modern” to a “postmodern” worldview.¹ In its essence, the postmodern worldview denies the existence of objective, absolute truth in favor of a pluralistic, individually constructed, and pragmatic view of truth.² While the magnitude of this shift may be exaggerated, it is true that American culture³ has undergone rapid change during the last decades of the twentieth century, and this change has implications for all of society, including the Christian Church.

¹John Watkins Chapman, a British artist who lived in the late 1800s, was possibly the first to use the term “postmodern.” Since that time, the term has undergone several changes in meaning. For a time, it was used primarily in connection with dialectics and deconstructionism. In the last decade, “postmodern” has been used as a broad term to refer to the variety of conceptual shifts that have occurred in Western society. Leonard Sweet, Soul Tsunami (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1999), 39. See also Stanley Grenz, A Primer on Postmodernism (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996).

²J. Richard Middleton and Brian J. Walsh, Truth Is Stranger Than It Used to Be (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1995), 31.

³The terms “America” and “American” have come to refer to the United States of America and the citizens of that nation. I recognize the ethnocentricity of such designations, but employ them in harmony with popular usage.
Problem

The evangelical church¹ in America has recognized some of these changes in the surrounding society.² Numerous evangelical authors have encouraged the church to adapt its methods of evangelism so that the gospel message will appear more attractive and defensible in the current cultural context.³

This willingness to alter evangelism methods is a step in the right direction. The problem is that the next step toward more effective witness is seldom dealt with, namely, the need to evaluate the evangelical gospel message.⁴ This evaluation is necessary, not because the gospel needs changing, but because evangelicals have, out of habit, employed narrow, formulaic terms and concepts in presenting the gospel message.⁵

Evangelicals seem to have assumed that while methods of evangelism may be changed, the evangelical salvation formula is the essential message of the gospel and

¹I use “evangelical” as a broad term for Protestants who believe in the Bible as God’s authoritative Word and who also believe in the primacy of evangelism.

²See Millard J. Erickson, Postmodernizing the Faith: Evangelical Responses to the Challenge of Postmodernism (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1998); Tom Sine, Mustard Seed versus McWorld (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1999), 25.

³According to Alister McGrath, for example, “The truth of the gospel ... must never be compromised. The issue has to do with presentation rather than substance.” Explaining Your Faith (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1996), 127.

⁴Numerous evangelical publications seek to help local congregations deal with the challenge of a rapidly changing society. However, most of “these solutions are methodological,” Darrell Gruder, ed., Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 2.

⁵This trend toward formulaic systematization was noted even in the early 1960s. Samuel Southard, Pastoral Evangelism (Nashville: Broadman, 1962), 31. See “Definitions and Delimitations” for the way the term “gospel” is used in this study.
therefore must remain the same. Thus, when a spiritual seeker asks, “What must I do to be saved?” an evangelical Christian is likely to respond with terminology and concepts that have remained relatively unchanged for decades. Evangelistic presentations may now be accompanied by multi-media pyrotechnics and contemporary Christian music, but when a seeker wants to know how to receive salvation, the message is likely the same one the seeker’s parents heard years before. This traditional way of describing the way of salvation often fails to communicate to contemporary Americans with clarity and impact.

**Purpose**

The purpose of this dissertation is to critique the typical evangelical response to the question, “What must I do to be saved?” and its implications, and then to suggest

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1. This sentiment is illustrated even in publications that are specifically interested in being culturally relevant. For example, notice the title “Never-Changing Message, Ever-Changing Mission,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 23 (January 1999): 1.


3. Robert Don Hughes, “Cross Cultural Communication,” in *Missiology*, ed. John Mark Terry, Ebbie Smith, and Justice Anderson (Nashville TN: Broadman & Holman, 1998), 281. It should be noted that the difficulty of speaking to the surrounding culture with relevance is not a new challenge for Christians. Even before the incredible cultural changes of the last two decades, it was recognized that “the average minister seems less and less capable of speaking meaningfully to and about the world and its pressing problems.” Eugene Nida, *Religion across Cultures* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), 14.

4. This biblical phrase from Acts 16:30 is only an example of how one might inquire about personally incorporating salvation. Contemporary seekers asking the same essential question would likely do so in different words. All citations are taken from the...
alternative "gospel presentations" that might communicate the biblical way of salvation with more clarity and impact in North America. This critique and the alternative suggestions will be informed by principles of communication theory and the witness of the New Testament, more specifically Luke-Acts.

**Justification**

A study of this nature is justified by the current situation in North America. Since 1992, David B. Barrett, world evangelization research consultant for the Southern Baptist Convention, has repeatedly suggested that people in the United States are over-saturated with opportunities to become Christians.\(^1\) So, while secularism exists in North America, it is also true that "the evangelistic theme is undeniably present in the marketplace at all times."\(^2\)

In spite of this steady stream of "Christian" communication, it is apparent that the gospel has not been clearly communicated to North Americans so that they are stimulated to respond.\(^3\) After many years of polling Americans to discover their values and religious knowledge, George Barna concluded, "We have learned that being exposed to

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\(^3\)For Charles Kraft, people are truly evangelized only when the gospel message is presented in such a way that they are stimulated to respond. Charles Kraft, *Communication Theory for Christian Witness* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1983), 53.
information does not mean that people absorb it, understand it, or embrace it."¹ This fact is illustrated by Barna’s discovery that only 4 percent of the American population can, in a general way, define these three Christian terms: gospel, John 3:16, and the Great Commission.²

One of the most energetic attempts to remedy this problem originated with Bill Bright of Campus Crusade for Christ. In 1965, Bright wrote a simple tract entitled “The Four Spiritual Laws.” It was his attempt at articulating the biblical way of salvation in a manner that would be clear for North Americans. It is estimated that this tract has been read by 2.5 billion people in America and around the world.³ It is surprising that, in spite of their popularity, the four spiritual laws Bright proposes have never been seriously examined, either for their biblical fidelity and balance or for their communicational effectiveness in American society.⁴ Such a study is long overdue.

¹Barna, Evangelism That Works, 35.
²Ibid., 36.
⁴Only one dissertation has specifically dealt with the four spiritual laws, and this study was not done in the North American context. Sobana Dasaratha Somaratna, “Witnessing to Sinhalese Buddhists through the Four Spiritual Laws of the Campus Crusade for Christ (Sri Lanka)” (Th.M. diss., Fuller Theological Seminary, 1996). Other popular gospel presentations, such as D. James Kennedy’s Evangelism Explosion (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1970), 21-27, have also escaped serious critique. I acknowledge, however, that evangelicals (and others) have expressed dislike for prepackaged presentations of the gospel. What has not been done is a more systematic evaluation of such presentations.
Methodology

I begin my study with a survey of the overall content and central themes contained in the typical evangelical gospel presentation. Thus I attempt to answer the question, What do evangelicals usually say about how to be saved? I then critique this typical presentation from two perspectives, by asking: (1) Does the evangelical response employ sound communicational principles so that it can communicate with impact in contemporary North American society? (2) Is the evangelical response true to the New Testament teaching on the steps one must take in order to be saved?

In order to arrive at an answer to the first question, I explore the basic principles of communication theory. Since sound communicational strategies are receptor based, I also study the basic characteristics of North American popular culture.

The second question is answered from the New Testament itself. In a number of instances (explicit and implicit) Jesus or the apostles were asked, “What must I do to be saved?” I look carefully at these instances and then critique the contemporary evangelical presentation in light of the biblical response to those who wanted to receive salvation.

Finally, I summarize the results of my study and suggest biblical modifications to the traditional evangelical salvation formula that may communicate with more clarity and

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2 The most explicit examples include Luke 10:25; 18:18; and Acts 16:30.
impact in contemporary North American society.

**Definitions and Delimitations**

In my research, I limited myself to printed materials and took special note of those sources which are most widely distributed and used in the United States of America. Therefore, these sources were in English.


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In the course of this study, I suggest that the term "postmodern" is not the best way to describe the mind-set of most Americans. At the same time, I recognize that despite its broad semantic range, the term is widely accepted. In a sense, then, I do not object to the use of the term "postmodern," because it alerts evangelicals (and others) that American culture has indeed changed in recent decades.

It must also be clear from the outset that I am not attempting to define "the gospel" in its entirety. Nor do I attempt to describe all the steps leading up to a person's conversion. Instead, I specifically focus on the message of instruction given to seekers who ask what they must believe or do to enter into eternal life. I may refer to this instruction with terms such as "salvation formula," "gospel presentation," or sometimes, simply as "gospel." In each case, I am referring to the same message, namely, the message describing what one must believe or do in order to be saved.

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CHAPTER 2
THE DEVELOPMENT AND SYSTEMATIZATION OF THE EVANGELICAL GOSPEL PRESENTATION IN AMERICA

Introduction

This chapter explores how evangelical Christians in the United States might typically answer the honest spiritual seeker who wants to know what he or she can and should do in order to be saved. In other words, what is the “plan” or “way” of salvation as it is typically expressed by evangelical Christians in America at the start of the new millennium?

In order to arrive at an answer, I first briefly trace the development of a succinct and systematized presentation of the plan of salvation in North America.¹ Second, I

¹A protracted discussion of the precise roots and lineage of the current evangelical gospel presentation is of little interest; however, a brief look back will provide at least some perspective on the current situation in America because, clearly, the “plan of salvation” has not always referred to a concise, three- or four-point outline. Dwight Moody, Jonathan Edwards, and R. A. Torrey illustrate this point. Edwards, for example, stressed the need for endurance, faithfulness, and “continual conversion,” which included the reformation of a person’s nature and behavior. Jonathan Edwards, Religious Affections, ed. John Smith. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), 343; quoted in Southard, Pastoral Evangelism, 12. Rather than recommending that all converts be treated identically, Moody advised flexibility as one dealt with different people. Dwight L. Moody, Great Joy (New York: E. B. Treat, 1876), 277-287, in Samuel Southard, Pastoral Evangelism, new rev. ed. (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981), 137. Moody elsewhere warns, “It is dangerous for those who are seeking salvation to lean upon the experience of other people. Many are waiting for a repetition of the experience of their grandfather or
introduce the three dominant gospel formulas used by evangelicals at the start of the
twenty-first century. Finally, I demonstrate that these three approaches, while resisted by
some, have nevertheless been widely accepted, employed, and emulated. In short, the
movement toward the systematization of the gospel presentation has been fully realized in
American evangelicalism.

The American Presentation of the Plan of
Salvation in Historical Perspective

When Presbyterians first immigrated to the United States, they brought with them
the custom of conducting regular outdoor communion services. These services were
rather conspicuous and attracted large numbers of irreligious people who came with a
variety of motives. Some may have been seeking God, others desired social interaction,
and still others were simply curious.¹ In the early nineteenth century, Presbyterians,
Methodists, and Baptists recognized the evangelistic potential of these outdoor gatherings.
In this context the camp meeting was born.

A camp meeting was a large religious gathering, usually lasting three or four days,

¹Giuseppe E. Dardano, “The Frontier Camp Meeting and Popular Culture in 19th
Century North America” (MA in History thesis, Queen’s University, Kingston, Ontario,
Canada, 1991), 4, 6-7.
and characterized by "sermons, exhortations, prayer meetings, and public testimonies." For a brief time at the beginning of the 1800s, camp meetings were the dominant means of "reaching the unconverted" in North America, particularly in the South.  

The Camp-Meeting Influence

Originally, Presbyterians, Methodists, and Baptists conducted joint camp meetings. The diversity of theological perspectives was obvious, but unity and cooperation were possible because "all the denominations were primarily concerned with converting souls."  

As an evangelistic strategy, the camp meeting was wildly successful. Although comprehensive statistics are difficult to obtain, all three denominations experienced explosive growth as "thousands of converts were gathered," especially during the joint camp-meeting frenzy of 1800 to 1805. Over time, Baptists and Presbyterians began to look with less and less favor on camp meetings, largely because of what they perceived to be emotional excesses which often occurred at these large gatherings.

The Methodists, meanwhile, continued to conduct camp meetings for many years.

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1Ibid., 3.
2Ibid., 2.
3Ibid., 12.
4For an example of the number of camp-meeting converts from a series of revivals in the American South, see ibid., 3-4. It is interesting to note that converts were not divided according to denominational affiliation, but were all tallied together.
Bishop Francis Asbury, who preached to a crowd of 10,000 at his first camp meeting in 1801, was an aggressive proponent of outdoor meetings. Asbury’s enthusiasm was well warranted and well rewarded. Between 1800 and 1850, the Methodist denomination saw membership grow from 64,894 to 1,259,906; this growth “was largely due to the regular employment of camp meetings.”

Although no study has been done on the precise nature of camp-meeting conversions, this much is clear: camp-meeting conversions were viewed primarily as climactic, instant events. For example, in what was perhaps the very first camp meeting, Methodist ministers Daniel Asbury and William McKendree (who later became Bishop) held a day and night service in a forest, which reportedly produced 300 converts. In the 1801 Cane Ridge, Kentucky, camp meeting, attended by as many as 25,000 people, 500 to 1,000 were reported to have been converted during Sunday services alone.

Clearly, the pioneer expectation was that conversion could happen during the course of a single day. In fact, camp-meeting preachers intentionally “sought to create an immediate crisis in the lives of the unsaved.” This crisis was caused by an understanding of the fact of sin and the need to repent. Horrifying verbal pictures of the flames of hell sweeping over unrepentant sinners were frequently and fruitfully employed by preachers

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1Dardano, 10.


3Dardano, 14.

4Ibid., 9.

such as Presbyterian evangelist James McGready.\(^1\) Eye-witnesses later described the agonizing cries for mercy from those who suddenly sensed their sin and, at large gatherings, the sound was said to be like the roar of Niagara.\(^2\) The sound was not only from those pleading for forgiveness and mercy, but also from those who, after prostrating themselves in the dust, received the assurance of their salvation and “arose shouting, ‘Praise God!’”\(^3\)

Camp-meeting evangelists recognized that the call for an instant conversion had its dangers. How could other believers be assured that such a conversion was genuine? Thus, in frontier evangelism, three safeguarding steps were generally taken before the conversion of new converts was acknowledged as valid and they were accepted into church membership. First, the convert was examined by a member the clergy, often after the meeting during which the conversion occurred. Second, there was often a time of public testimony before the church during which the convert would share his or her experience. This public testimony time seems to have been especially favored by the Baptists.\(^4\) Finally, there was a probationary period of instruction, which, for Methodists, lasted six months. This time of instruction (and even discipline) was used by the church

\(^1\) C. A. Johnson, 55.
\(^2\) Ibid., 64.
\(^3\) Ibid., 58; see also John B. Boles, *The Great Revival, 1787-1805* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1972), 72, where hundreds are described as “finding security in apparent salvation.” Quoted in Dardano, 10.
to judge whether or not the apparent conversion and experience of salvation was indeed genuine.¹

Although the popularity of camp meetings gradually diminished, the style of preaching employed there—and specifically, the preacher’s attempt to create and resolve a spiritual crisis in the lives of the unsaved—soon found its way into mainstream American evangelism.²

Samuel Southard would later call this “instant evangelism,” which he defined as an individualistic appeal for the sinner to be saved, during which “the hearer is asked to make an immediate decision for Christ.”³ Southard also rightly noted that this style, demonstrated in frontier camp-meeting evangelism and further popularized by Finney, was the dominant style of evangelism in America by the 1950s.⁴

By the 1950s, however, the three conversion safeguards employed by earlier evangelists were largely ignored.⁵ In place of examination by the clergy, public testimony, and a probationary period of instruction, two new steps were accepted as safeguards. It was believed that if these were taken, the evangelist could “assure a person

¹Southard (1962), 28.

²Charles Finney was one of the key figures who introduced and popularized this style of preaching and evangelism. He clearly attempted to create a crisis in the unsaved, and then called for these individuals to make an immediate decision for Christ and salvation. Ibid., 12-13.

³Ibid., 24.

⁴Ibid., 30-32.

⁵Ibid., 28.
of instant salvation.” The two safeguards were (1) an approved plan of salvation which
the evangelist shares, and (2) the verbal assent to this plan by the spiritual seeker.2

The Plan of Salvation Becomes Systematized

Evidence of the movement toward the establishment of an approved plan of
salvation appears in the writings of Edgar Young Mullins and Austin Crouch. In 1917,
Mullins suggested what he called an “order of salvation” that involved both “God’s part”
and “man’s part.”3 Although Mullins acknowledged that no aspect was fully complete
without the other and that salvation did not come by following a series of isolated steps,
he did refer to four elements in salvation: repentance,4 faith,5 conversion,6 and finally,
regeneration.7 Austin Crouch’s Plan of Salvation took another step toward
systematization in that he summarized the reception of salvation into five specific steps.
His purpose was to provide an outline for personal witnessing and, in this more rigid
approach, Crouch assumed that the facts of the gospel and the response required by the

1Ibid., 29.

2Ibid.

3Edgar Young Mullins, The Christian Religion in Its Doctrinal Expression
(Philadelphia: Judson, 1917), 368.

4Ibid., 369.

5Ibid., 371.

6Ibid., 377.

7Ibid., 378. Mullins later describes regeneration as an “instantaneous” experience
(385).
sinner were uniform. Hence, one basic approach was all that was needed. As will soon be evident, this trend toward systematization was fully realized in the latter half of the twentieth century.

**The Plan of Salvation in America at the Close of the Twentieth Century**

My interest, as I look to the situation in North America at the beginning of the twenty-first century, is not to explore scholarly works which debate various aspects of soteriology, but rather, to simply "hear" what spiritual seekers are likely to hear from the evangelical community when they ask what they must do to be saved.

A wide variety of evangelistic training programs in North America is intended to equip Christians with the tools to respond to just such a question. A careful review of each of them is beyond the scope of this study. There are, however, three dominant presentations of the gospel that have had a major impact on the popular evangelical understanding of the way of salvation.

In the only study of its type, *Christianity Today* conducted a survey of 1,500 readers in an attempt to better understand evangelistic attitudes and practice at the grassroots level in the United States. This 1991 research revealed that the three most popular training programs for personal evangelism were produced by Evangelism Explosion (EE), Campus Crusade for Christ (CCC), and the Billy Graham Evangelistic

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1 Austin Crouch, *The Plan of Salvation* (Nashville: Sunday School Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, 1924), from chapter headings and subtitles; quoted in Southard (1962), 31.
Association (BGEA). Each of these organizations has a succinct gospel presentation designed to be used in personal witnessing.

D. James Kennedy’s Evangelism Explosion Presentation

D. James Kennedy began his ministry in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, in 1959. He had recently graduated from seminary and planned on going to Africa as a missionary, but a back injury prevented him from realizing his dream. Instead, he became the pastor of the Coral Ridge Presbyterian Church, which had a membership of about 50. Things did not go smoothly at first and, as Kennedy later admitted, “I soon had that group of 50 down to 17.”

About this time, Kennedy spent a week in Decatur, Georgia, assisting a former seminary classmate in a series of revival meetings. While there, he had the opportunity to observe many people accept Christ as a result of home visits during which a clear, succinct presentation of the gospel was given. He returned to Ft. Lauderdale and began to employ this same method: personal visits that included a simple presentation of the gospel and a call for decision. Success came almost immediately and the church began to grow. Soon, Kennedy became aware that if he wanted to maximize his effectiveness, he must intentionally train the members of his church, thus equipping them for ministry. He

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3Ibid.
came to believe "it is more important to train a soul-winner than to win a soul."[1]

So, in 1965, Kennedy held his first lay-witnessing training program at Coral Ridge.[2] Others began to note the success at Coral Ridge and, in 1967, Kennedy conducted his first leadership training clinic, which was attended by 36 pastors.[3] By 1970, Coral Ridge Presbyterian Church had grown to over 2,000 members[4] and Kennedy published his first training manual, *Evangelism Explosion.*[5]

By 1983, Evangelism Explosion International, the organization founded by Kennedy, had conducted training seminars on all continents. Kennedy's vision, however, included "planting" Evangelism Explosion (EE) in all 211 countries of the world. According to internal sources, EE accomplished this goal in 1995.[6] EE's impact is substantiated by *Christianity Today's* 1991 survey which showed that of all the evangelism training programs mentioned by respondents, "Evangelism Explosion emerged as the most popular."[7]

In his first training manual, Kennedy summarized EE's training program as centering on "a simple, positive statement of the Good News of the Gospel. We have

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found that most Christians do not know how to make an intelligible, forceful and interesting presentation of the Gospel. This is basically what we are trying to do."

The presentation\(^2\) begins with two questions: “Do you know for sure that you are going to be with God in heaven?” and “If God were to ask you, ‘Why should I let you into my heaven?’ what would you say?”\(^3\)

If a person does not know how to respond to these questions, or responds incorrectly, the presentation argues that there are “five things you need to know about eternal life.”\(^4\) These five things deal with the nature of heaven, human sin, God’s mercy and justice, Jesus as God’s provision for sin, and faith. The presentation closes with an invitation for the seeker to trust God, accept Jesus as Savior and Lord, repent, and pray a prayer in which he or she verbalizes the desire to receive Christ. The seeker who responds as requested and prays the suggested prayer receives the assurance: “You are now a child of God! Forever!”\(^5\)

While Kennedy acknowledges that each person who uses this outline should personalize it, it is clear that this freedom is limited to personal illustrations and/or the use of “other Scriptures which speak strongly to him concerning one of the points of the


\(^3\)Ibid.

\(^4\)Ibid., http://www.eeinternational.org/DYKFS/English/DYK_Eng_3.htm

\(^5\)Ibid., http://www.eeinternational.org/DYKFS/English/DYK_Eng_18.htm

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The five basic “skeleton” points of the gospel are to remain constant.  

For EE, this is the essence of the gospel, and it is a gospel that has been widely communicated. Darius Salter, in his comprehensive *American Evangelism: Its Theology and Practice*, asserts that “no one has exceeded James Kennedy’s efforts in providing Christians with a formula by which their faith can be shared. . . . His model for winning new converts, Evangelism Explosion, has been emulated perhaps more than any other single church program for saving the lost.”^3

Bill Bright and Campus Crusade for Christ’s Four Spiritual Laws

In the year 2000, Campus Crusade for Christ International (CCCI), headquartered in Orlando, Florida, was one of the largest interdenominational, non-profit ministries in the world. Founded by William R. “Bill” and Vonette Bright in 1951 as an outreach ministry to college campuses in North America, CCCI had grown to over 20,000 full-time staff members and nearly 500,000 trained volunteers working in 186 countries around the world. Bright served as president of CCCI until he was nearly 80 years of age. In July of 2000, he officially designated Steve Douglas, then director of U.S. Ministry for Campus

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2Ibid.

3Salter, 205.

Crusade for Christ, to follow him as president.\textsuperscript{1}

One of Bright’s core beliefs was that every Christian should be prepared to give a verbal testimony to unbelievers of the essence of the gospel. To better prepare Christians for this task, Bright wrote a simple gospel presentation which he called the Four Spiritual Laws. In spite of his many innovative ministries (such as Athletes in Action and Here’s Life America), Bright is perhaps best known as the author of this short booklet.\textsuperscript{2}

The Four Spiritual Laws were inspired by the presentation of a sales consultant, who, as a friend of Bright, addressed the Campus Crusade staff in 1957. During his lecture, the consultant argued that every good salesman has a pitch. In other words, he tells each potential customer the same thing. The danger comes, the consultant said, when the salesman tires of his “pitch,” changes the message, and then loses effectiveness.\textsuperscript{3}

Then, in front of the staff, Bright recalled, the presenter “zeroed in on me.”\textsuperscript{4} He suggested that although Bright thought he had a unique gospel message for each person he met, in actuality, “he has only one pitch.”\textsuperscript{5} Bright was deeply offended and resentful, and viewed the presenter’s assertion that he employed a “sales pitch” as “repugnant and offensive.”\textsuperscript{6}

\textsuperscript{1}Ibid.

\textsuperscript{2}Salter, 121.

\textsuperscript{3}Bill Bright, \textit{Come Help Change the World} (Old Tappan, NJ: F. H. Revell, 1970), 43.

\textsuperscript{4}Ibid.

\textsuperscript{5}Ibid.

\textsuperscript{6}Ibid., 44.
To his credit, Bright did not ignore the consultant’s assertion. Later, Bright acknowledged, “I began to reflect on exactly what I shared with the various ones with whom I worked, young or old, management or labor, Episcopalian or Baptist, students or professors, or the men in jails or on Skid Row. That afternoon, I wrote down my basic presentation and, to my amazement, my friend was right. I had been sharing basically the same thing with everyone, without realizing it.”

This basic presentation, which Bright called “God’s Plan for Your Life,” was soon condensed into four spiritual laws which Bright asked his staff to memorize. In 1965, “to ensure faithfulness to the content and uniformity of presentation,” the four spiritual laws were printed in booklet form.

At the time of Bright’s death in 2003, “The Four Spiritual Laws” had been printed and distributed in over 200 different languages, read by approximately 2.5 billion people, and ranked as “the most widely distributed religious pamphlet in history.”

The preamble of “The Four Spiritual Laws” begins, “Just as there are physical laws that govern the physical universe, so are there spiritual laws which govern your relationship with God.” These four laws are:

1Ibid.
2Ibid., 45.
3Ibid., 45-46.
4Campus Crusade for Christ, Introductory Course Manual.
5Warren, 53.
6Bright, “Have You Heard?”
Law 1: God LOVES you and offers a wonderful PLAN for your life.

Law 2: Man is SINFUL and SEPARATED from God. Therefore, he cannot know and experience God's love and plan for his life.

Law 3: Jesus Christ is God's ONLY provision for man's sin. Through Him you can know and experience God's love and plan for your life.

Law 4: We must individually RECEIVE Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord; then we can know and experience God's love and plan for our lives.¹

As was with Kennedy's presentation, a suggested prayer to receive Christ is provided, followed by an assurance of salvation.²

In the nearly 40 years since "The Four Spiritual Laws" were first written, virtually no changes have been made. Apparently this was due to Bright's belief that "the message contained in the Four Spiritual Laws booklet is a 'transferable concept.'"³ By "transferable concept," Bright meant "a truth that can be communicated to another, who in turn will communicate the same truth to another, generation after generation, without distorting or diluting the original truth."⁴ Thus, over four decades after they were originally written, the four spiritual laws remain consistent—as well as highly influential in popular American evangelicalism's understanding of the gospel.

¹Ibid. Here, I have listed the four laws exactly as they appear in Bright's outline, but I have not included Bright's supporting texts and comments.

²Ibid.

³Bright, Come Help, 77.

⁴Ibid.
There can be little doubt that over the last half of the twentieth century, Billy Graham has emerged from humble beginnings to become the most popular and enduring of all American evangelists.1 William “Billy” Franklin Graham was born in 1918 and spent his childhood years on a dairy farm in Charlotte, North Carolina. When Graham was 16, an evangelist named Mordecai Ham conducted a series of revival meetings in Charlotte and Billy made a personal decision to commit his life to Christ. Five years later, he was ordained by a church in the Southern Baptist Convention.2 Graham attended Wheaton College in Illinois and graduated in 1943. That same year, he married Ruth Bell, daughter of a missionary doctor who had served for many years in China.3

Graham first came into the national spotlight as a result of his wildly successful 1949 evangelistic crusade4 in Los Angeles, California. The following year, Graham founded the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association (BGEA), now headquartered in Minneapolis, Minnesota. By 2003, the BGEA produced a weekly radio program,

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1 Salter, 103.


4 Although the term “crusade” carries negative connotations, especially for Muslims, it is the term Graham’s Evangelistic Association most often uses when speaking of Graham’s public evangelistic efforts.
newspaper column, *Decision* magazine,\(^1\) evangelistic films, as well as television broadcasts of Graham’s preaching crusades.\(^2\)

Through his many years of ministry, Graham focused on a singular goal. He writes, “My one purpose in life is to help people find a personal relationship with God, which, I believe, comes through knowing Christ.”\(^3\) It has been estimated that Graham has preached “to more people in live audiences than anyone else in history—over 210 million people” and has led “hundreds of thousands of individuals to make personal decisions to live for Christ, which is the main thrust of his ministry.”\(^4\) Graham has also written 25 books, many of which became bestsellers. It is not surprising that in the year 2002, Graham, who was in his 80s, had appeared in the Gallup organization’s “Ten Most Admired Men in the World” poll for 37 consecutive years.\(^5\)

What exactly is this gospel that Graham presents and trains others to present? When he invites his listeners to come forward at the end of his sermons—and people respond, “usually in numbers far exceeding what anyone would have predicted”\(^6\)—what exactly does he want them to know or do?

The most succinct answer to this question is found in Graham’s gospel outline,

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\(^1\) *Decision* has a circulation of 1.4 million and is available in English, German, and Braille. The Billy Graham Evangelistic Association. “Biographies: Billy Graham.”

\(^2\) Ibid.

\(^3\) Ibid.

\(^4\) Ibid.

\(^5\) Ibid.

\(^6\) Martin, 75.
“Steps to Peace with God,”¹ which is found in a variety of printed forms, as well as on the
BGEA internet site.² An outline of Graham’s presentation follows.

Step One: God’s Purpose: Peace and Life

God loves you and wants you to experience peace and life—abundant and
eternal.

Step Two: The Problem: Our Separation

God gave us a freedom to choose, and we chose to go our own way. This
results in separation from God.

Step Three: God’s Bridge: The Cross

Jesus Christ died on the cross and rose from the grave. He paid the
penalty for our sin and bridged the gap between God and people.

Step Four: Our Response: Receive Christ

We must trust Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and receive Him by
personal invitation.

Graham then invites the seeker to “receive Jesus Christ right now” and, as in the
previous presentations, provides a suggested prayer. A seeker who has prayed the prayer
is assured of salvation.³

¹Following Graham’s Nashville, Tennessee, crusade, broadcast on television on 7
September 2000, this was the presentation that was prepared for people who wanted to
accept Christ.

.org/spritualhelp/steps.asp (2 August 2000).

³This outline is taken from the BGEA internet site, Billy Graham, “Steps to Peace
With God.”
The Widespread Acceptance of the Gospel Formula in American Evangelicalism

It is difficult to overestimate the influence that the dominant gospel presentation has had on the popular understanding of salvation in North America. Even if the presentations by Kennedy, Bright, or Graham are not overtly used, they provide the framework, the concepts, and the terminology that evangelical Americans tend to most often employ when responding to a seeker who wants to know the gospel and what to do to be saved.

This can be demonstrated by even a cursory look at contemporary evangelism tracts and witnessing training materials from other prominent organizations and authors.

The American Tract Society (ATS) is a case in point. ATS is a non-sectarian, non-profit evangelical organization whose primary aim is "to reach the world with the life-changing gospel of Jesus Christ."¹ The society was originally organized in the United States in 1825, but it traces its roots to the Religious Tract Society of London, instituted in 1799. In addition to a Board of Directors, ATS also maintains a Council of Reference. In 2003, council members included well-known pastors, evangelists, and scholars such as Robert E. Coleman, Jay Kesler, Lloyd John Ogilvie, Luis Palau, Billy Graham, Franklin Graham, Haddon W. Robinson, Charles C. Ryrie, Robert H. Schuller, and Charles R. Swindoll.²

As its name suggests, ATS's primary means of spreading the gospel is by

²Ibid.
providing the best possible in Christian tracts and related materials at prices that are partially underwritten by contributions.” ATS has approximately 175 different tracts available for distribution. The society has attempted to ensure that their tracts are attractive, colorful, creative, and contemporary. For example, the face of the tract may contain the picture of a well-known, popular cultural hero (such as Jeff Gordon or Reggie White) or be geared toward recent television shows, movies, or current news events. Shortly after the death of Diana, Princess of Wales, ATS produced a tract with a glossy photo of Diana with the words, “In loving memory . . .” on the cover. More recently, a “Who Wants to Be a Millionaire” tract was published. The entire tract—visually, verbally, and thematically—was clearly patterned after the ABC television hit “Who Wants to Be a Millionaire.” The June/July 2000 ATS catalogue also

1Ibid.

2This is based on the number of tracts included in their “ATS Big Variety Pact” which, according to their catalogue, contains “all tracts currently in stock.” American Tract Society, “ATS Order Form, Jun/July 2000” (Garland, TX: American Tract Society, 2000), 3.


6In Loving Memory . . . (Garland, TX: American Tract Society, 1997).

7Peter Batzing, Who Wants to Be a Millionaire (Garland, TX: American Tract Society, 2000).
included a Pokemon tract for children, a tract for hunters written by a bow hunter, a tract with Superman and Batman on the cover, and tracts geared for African Americans, using terms such as “brotherman,” “livin’ large,” and “phat.” One such tract begins with the question, “Yo, homey! What program are you down with?” and later promises that “the Almighty has a program that makes life fresh and cool.”

In short, it is clear that ATS is not simply reproducing tracts inherited from their predecessor, the 1799 Religious Tract Society of London. Instead, they are making a genuine effort to remain culturally sensitive and “fresh and cool” as they attempt to “reach the world with the life-changing gospel of Jesus Christ.”

In spite of this wide variety of tracts, a careful reading of ATS material reveals a certain pattern. Nearly every tract is essentially a slightly different packaging of a basic gospel presentation. In other words, Lady Di, Pokemon, or Jeff Gordon may be on the face of the tract, but the reader can be almost certain that, after the introduction, the tract

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2 Dwight Schuh, *The Greatest Hunt of All* (Garland, TX: American Tract Society, 1999). At the time he wrote this tract, Schuh was editor of *Bowhunter* magazine.
3 *Super Heroes* (Garland, TX: American Tract Society, 2000).
4 *Ya’ Gotta Get with the Program* (Garland, TX: American Tract Society, 1996).
6 *Ya’ Gotta Get with the Program*.
7 Ibid.
8 American Tract Society, “Overview of ATS.”
will move through a basic gospel presentation and close with an invitation for the reader to accept the message and be saved.

What exactly is the gospel that is presented by ATS? Their June/July 2000 catalogue offered a “Dollar Pack” which contained “5 top evangelism tracts.”1 A cursory look at these top five tracts reveals that the gospel according to ATS is essentially identical with the gospel according to Kennedy, Bright, and Graham. Two of these five top evangelism tracts (“Steps to Peace with God” and “How to Become a Christian”)2 were actually written by Billy Graham and, not surprisingly, parallel his presentation “Steps to Peace With God,” which, as has already noted, is intimately related to Bright’s four spiritual laws.

The third of these top five tracts begins with one of the diagnostic questions borrowed from Kennedy’s gospel presentation, “If you were standing at the gate of heaven and God asked you . . . ‘Why should I let you in?’ What would you tell him?”3 The rest of the tract follows Bright’s four spiritual laws outline, which, as was already noted, is followed by Graham.

The fourth evangelism tract, “Power! Do You Have It?”4 features NASCAR driver Jeff Gordon, who testifies that “When I’m racing hard, there isn’t anything on my


3Billy Graham, How to Become a Christian (Garland, TX: American Tract Society, n. d.).

4Ron Wheeler, Heaven’s Gate (Garland, TX: American Tract Society, 1999).

5Power!
mind—not trophies, not fame—except to glorify God and win the race.” The tract presents God as “the only One who can give us the POWER to be truly successful.”¹ In order to obtain this power, the reader is led through the same four-step outline used in each of the three previous tracts: (1) God loves them, (2) people are sinful and separated from God, (3) Jesus died for us as God’s solution to our separation, and (4) we must believe in Jesus as our Savior, who died to give us eternal life.

The fact that this same gospel presentation is used in four of the five evangelism tracts is not mere coincidence. It is the dominant gospel “blue-print” used in ATS evangelistic publications.²

The fifth evangelism tract, Where Will You Spend Eternity? is different from the previous four in that it begins with human sinfulness rather than the positive note of God’s love. Aside from this, the presentation again echoes the dominant themes and progression in the presentations of Kennedy, Bright, and Graham.³

ATS is certainly not the only organization that has essentially “adopted” the

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¹Ibid.

²For example, see Ron Wheeler, Four Laws for Living! (Garland, TX: American Tract Society, 1999); In Loving Memory . . . ; Peter Batzing, It’s Harvest Time (Garland, TX: American Tract Society, 1998); Michelle Akers, Akers (Garland, TX: American Tract Society, 2000); Billy Graham, New Millennium (Garland, TX: American Tract Society, 1999); Batzing, Who Wants to Be a Millionaire; and Michael Chang (Garland, TX: American Tract Society, 1997).

³Tracts Where Will You Spend Eternity? (Garland, TX: American Tract Society, 1999); What Must I Do To Be Saved? (Garland, TX: American Tract Society, 1997); and Lindsay Terry and Marilyn Terry, The Unusual Story Behind “Joy to the World” (Garland, TX: American Tract Society, 2000), are other ATS tracts which begin with human sin rather than God’s love.
“gospel” as it is defined by Kennedy, Bright, and Graham. There are other prominent examples.

During the 1990s, Willow Creek Community Church in South Barrington, Illinois, was perceived by many to be an excellent example of contemporary, culturally sensitive outreach to irreligious people. Willow Creek employs drama, a contemporary style of music, and “non-churchy” language in an attempt to reach others with the gospel.

What is this gospel, according to Willow Creek? The essential gospel message is articulated in *Becoming a Contagious Christian*, coauthored by Bill Hybels (senior pastor of Willow Creek) and Mark Mittelberg (then director of evangelism at Willow Creek). For Hybels and Mittelberg, there are “four primary points we need to know in order to get a firm grasp of the gospel.”

First, God is loving, holy, and just. Second, humans have sinned against God and are helpless as they face the death penalty for their rebellion. Third, “Christ died in our place, as our substitute.” For Hybels, this is “the central truth of the gospel.” Finally, “we must individually receive Christ and his gift of salvation” by saying “yes” to Him.

These four basic points clearly parallel the essential points of Kennedy, Bright, and Graham. Thus, in spite of the supposed contemporizing of the gospel, it is clear that

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1Bill Hybels and Mark Mittleberg, *Becoming a Contagious Christian* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), 150.

2Ibid., 152.

3Ibid.

4Ibid., 154.
Willow Creek’s gospel and way of salvation is essentially identical with the traditional approaches of previous decades.

The same is true of Rebecca Manley Pippert. The twentieth-anniversary edition of her well-received book, *Out of the Saltshaker and into the World*, contains “an outline of the Christian message that was developed for students and staff in InterVarsity Christian Fellowship.” This outline, entitled “First Steps to God,” contains the familiar four basic elements once again: (1) God is loving, holy, and just; (2) people are sinful, separated from God, and facing death; (3) Christ “died as a substitute for us by paying the death penalty for our rebellion (Romans 5:8)”; (4) we must respond by repenting, believing, and receiving Christ. Finally, the outline mentions that, although “salvation comes to you freely,” it was costly for God. One’s response, then, should be “a life of discipleship.” Once again, the similarity between InterVarsity Christian Fellowship’s “First Steps to God” and the approaches of Kennedy, Bright, and Graham is clear.

There are many other examples beyond the American Tract Society, Willow Creek, and InterVarsity Christian Fellowship. Daniel Owens, director for Evangelism and Discipleship of the Luis Palau Evangelistic Association, includes a copy of the Four Spiritual Laws in his book and says, “I suggest that you memorize this basic outline and

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2Ibid.

3Ibid., 268-69.

4Even the title of InterVarsity’s presentation, “First Steps to God,” is an echo of Graham’s “Steps to Peace with God.”
use it as a starting point in your presentation. It is simple yet complete.”

The last chapter of Tom Stebbins’s *Evangelism by the Book* is a reprint of Evangelism Explosion’s gospel presentation. At the time, Stebbins was teaching evangelism at Alliance Theological Seminary (of the Christian and Missionary Alliance).^2

**Token Resistance to the Dominant Gospel**

In spite of the general acceptance of this dominant gospel presentation, not all Christian communicators seem comfortable with this approach. Some express this dissatisfaction with mild statements such as “there is no one single gospel formula nor a single, easily memorized format for presenting the good news.”^3 Others resort to stronger statements that imply that the use of “prepackaged” ways of presenting the gospel can sink so low as to be compared to the “techniques and manipulation of people reminiscent of cults.”^4 This dissatisfaction with existing gospel presentations is assumed by Robert T. Henderson, whose book is advertised as a way of personal evangelism “for people wary of packaged deals and organized programs.”^5

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Those who reject or criticize pre-planned approaches find themselves in a difficult position, however. They may assert that “there are not steps to salvation” and even that “it is wrong to communicate a specific sequence of steps,” but in doing so, they are often reduced to speaking of the gospel in abstract, cliched generalities.

Some, such as Win Arn and Charles Arn, are inconsistent in that they first argue that “evangelism training that relies on canned presentations, memorized testimonies, and spiritual dictums does not prepare the believer to respond to the unique needs of the non-Christian.” Later, however, these same authors suggest that it can be helpful to write out one’s testimony and memorize it. Believers are told: You must know the “basics of your faith: humanity’s sin, Christ’s incarnation, death, and resurrection, repentance, faith, and so on.” While memorized testimonies and pre-planned presentations are ridiculed, the same authors seem to be encouraging these very things.

Others lament the over-simplification of the gospel into “3 or 4 basic facts,” but then, when presenting their version of the more complete gospel, also simplify the gospel into a four-point outline. Ironically, these four points are uncannily similar to the


3Ibid., 110.

4Metzger, 29.

5Ibid., 44, 46-47.
dominant presentations of Bright and Graham.¹

One way to solve this problem is by simply avoiding the question of what the gospel is.² This was noted by Kennedy, who, in 1970, observed that "a very useful tool which is often omitted from texts on evangelism is an actual presentation of the gospel itself."³

The struggle between preplanned, memorized presentations and more flexible, individual approaches is illustrated by Leighton Ford. Ford warns against the potential dangers of preplanned approaches⁴ and calls for a variety of flexible approaches in presenting the gospel message.⁵ Yet, when he asks, "What is the minimum truth a person needs to know to become a Christian?" the "essential truths" of the Christian message are: (1) God's purpose, (2) man's need, (3) Christ's provision, and (4) man's response.⁶ This is clearly an echo of both Bright and Graham. In fact, Ford includes a copy of Graham's "Steps to Peace with God" later in his book.⁷

¹Arthur G. McPhee, Friendship Evangelism (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1978), is a notable exception in that he points out the weaknesses of the traditional evangelical presentation and provides substantive content suggestions for a more caring approach.

²Note, for example, Delos Miles, Overcoming Barriers to Witnessing (Nashville: Broadman, 1984). Miles never attempts to answer this question.


⁵Ibid., 133.

⁶Ibid., 134.

⁷Ibid., 138-139.
Summary

The brief historical survey shows that in the early 1800s, frontier evangelists called for and expected immediate, punctiliar, climactic experiences of conversion and salvation. At the same time, these frontier evangelists believed that those who were "saved" in such experiences needed to verify their salvation—usually through a personal examination by a member of the clergy, public testimony, and the willingness to undergo a probationary period of instruction between their experience and acceptance into church membership through baptism. These three elements (examination, public testimony, and instruction) were viewed as necessary to ensure that the conversion experience was genuine and that the individual was indeed saved.

By the mid 1900s, the "plan of salvation" gradually came to be understood as a presentation of the essentials of the gospel that must be understood and believed by the one seeking salvation. This "plan" became more concise and operated under the assumption that the same message should be employed with all people.¹ Seekers who responded to this succinct, systematized approach were assured that they were saved.

By the end of the twentieth century, three standardized gospel presentations had risen to prominence: D. James Kennedy's Evangelism Explosion Presentation, Bill Bright's Four Spiritual Laws, and Billy Graham's Steps to Peace with God. Although not every evangelical presentation follows these three, there is general unity and uniformity in both the structure and the content of the way of salvation as expressed by evangelicals in North America. The more than 1.5 billion copies of the Four Spiritual laws that have

¹Southard (1962), 31. Here, Southard is speaking of Crouch's approach, which he presents as representative of the basic trend of that time.
been printed, BGEA's outreach to millions, and EE's aggressive training program have had tremendous impact on the thinking of evangelical Christians in America. Whether one likes it or not, pre-planned approaches have been widely adopted and emulated. As has been demonstrated, not only do the three dominant presentations resemble one another, they also are echoed in the writings of many others.

Following this brief survey of the most widely accepted gospel presentations, chapter 3 presents an analysis of the contents of these formulas for salvation.
CHAPTER 3

THE CONTENT AND CHARACTERISTICS OF THE EVANGELICAL GOSPEL PRESENTATION IN AMERICA

The previous chapter of this study traced the development and widespread adoption of three dominant evangelical presentations of the gospel. In this chapter, I first explore the basic progression and content of these presentations. In doing so, it will become clear that the gospel according to Kennedy, Bright, and Graham is essentially identical. Second, I highlight ten characteristics shared by these presentations. These ten characteristics are further analyzed in chapters 5 and 6 of this study.

The Seven Steps of the Gospel Presentation

A careful reading of the three dominant plans of salvation reveals a seven-step progression in the presentation of the gospel: (1) a desirable good is presented; (2) the desirable good is not attained; (3) the problem is presented; (4) the solution is explained; (5) a personal response is requested; (6) the correct response brings the desirable good; and (7) future expectations are articulated. Each step deserves further exploration.

A Desirable Good Is Presented

Evangelism Explosion begins by promising to present “the best news you could
ever hear!” For Kennedy, this news is that heaven—and eternal life there—“is a free gift!” Campus Crusade’s first spiritual law is that “God loves you and offers a wonderful plan for your life.” Billy Graham begins with the assurance that “God loves you and wants you to experience peace and life—an abundant and eternal.” Each presentation, then, begins by focusing on something positive that all people desire.

What leads to this optimistic beginning? In the case of the Four Spiritual Laws, Bright gives insight into this question in his book, *Come Help Change the World*. Shortly after he returned home from an exhausting trip, Bright attempted to place the four spiritual laws into final form for their first printing. He had completed his writing and final editing, and went upstairs to sleep, while his wife Vonette finished the typing. He later recounted:

> In fact, I was in bed, just at the point of going to sleep, when suddenly there came clear as a bell to my conscious mind the fact that there was something wrong about starting the Four Laws on the negative note of man’s sinfulness. Why not start where God starts, with His love? I had been drawn to Christ originally because I was overwhelmed with God’s love. The love of God had been the basis of my presentation of the gospel ever since I had become a Christian...

> So, I got out of bed, went to the head of the stairs and called down to Vonette and the girls to revise the presentation so that the first law would be, “God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life.”... Thus, the Four Spiritual Laws started with the positive note of God’s love.

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3 Bright, “Have You Heard?”
4 Graham, “Steps to Peace.”
5 Bright, *Come Help*, 46.
This late-night alteration, made by a travel-weary Bill Bright, has endured into this millennium and influenced the way evangelicals understand and present the gospel. Together with the other presentations, it presents something good.

The Desirable Good Is Not Attained

Second, dissatisfaction and tension are built because this desirable “something” either is not or cannot be attained. Immediately after describing heaven as a “free gift,” Kennedy provides more news: “No amount of personal effort, good works, or religious deeds can earn a place in heaven for you.” This statement suddenly makes heaven sound somehow unattainable. Kennedy then continues to build tension as he describes humanity’s sin, which brings death.

Bright and Graham introduce dissatisfaction and tension through the use of a simple question. At the conclusion of law one, which declares God’s love and promise of “a wonderful plan for your life,” Bright asks what the reader is probably already wondering: “Why is it that most people are not experiencing the abundant life?” Graham’s question is almost identical: “Why don’t most people have this peace and abundant life that God planned for us to have?” So, both assume that the good life which is available is not a present reality for the recipients of their message.

This tension or gap between the desirable good life (present and eternal) planned

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2Bright, “Have You Heard?”

3Graham, “Steps to Peace.”
for us by God and the reality of our own less than abundant lives is explained in the next step.

The Problem Is Presented

The reason for this incongruence between the desirable “what is possible” and the disappointing “what is” is then explained. For EE, the problem is that heaven, though a free gift, is unattainable because “man is a sinner” and can never reach the standard of perfection (sinlessness) necessary for entrance into heaven. Kennedy strengthens this argument by quoting Rom 3:23 (“For all have sinned and come short of the glory of God”) and Matt 5:48 (“Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect”).

God’s character exacerbates the problem. On the one hand, “God is merciful and therefore doesn’t want to punish us,” but this door of mercy is quickly slammed shut by the mention of yet another of God’s attributes: “God is just and therefore must punish sin.” Kennedy continues by asserting that God “will by no means clear the guilty” (Exod 34:7) and “the soul that sinneth, it shall die” (Ezek 18:4).

What EE advertised as “the best news you could ever hear!” has quickly turned sour. The free gift of heaven has been wrenched from the seekers’ grasp, for they are


sinners and face a God who, because he is just, “must” punish them with death. In other words, God will kill them. In case this point is not clear yet, EE sums it up succinctly. “We have a problem. God loves us and doesn’t want to punish us, but he is just and must punish sin.” Human sin, then, is the problem which brings death and thus keeps humanity from heaven and eternal life.

For Bright, sin is also the problem. The reason “most people are not experiencing the abundant life” is stated in law two: “Man is sinful and separated from God. Therefore, he cannot know and experience God’s love and plan for his life.” Instead of mentioning punishment, as Kennedy does, Bright focuses on the idea of separation. This is not a benign condition, however. To make this clear, Bright quotes Rom 6:23a, “For the wages of sin is death.” He then defines this death as “spiritual separation from God.”

Bright uses a simple diagram which pictures “Holy God” above and “Sinful Man” below, with an unbridgeable chasm between. He explains, “This diagram illustrates that God is holy and man is sinful. A great gulf separates the two.” The precise reason a Holy God and sinful man are necessarily separated is not explained; the separation is merely stated as a fact. Perhaps the closest Bright comes to an explanation is to say that

2 Bright, “Have You Heard?”
3 Ibid.
4 Ibid.
5 Ibid.
man went "his own independent way, and fellowship with God was broken."' Man's choice to be independent, then, isolated him from God.

Graham likewise emphasizes sin and separation as the obstacles which keep humanity from the desirable good. In his second step, Graham explains that God created us and "gave us a will and a freedom of choice. We chose to disobey God and go our own willful way. We still make this choice today. This results in separation from God."^

Like Bright, Graham uses a graphic which depicts humanity standing at the edge of a broad, uncrossable chasm, looking across to the other side where God presumably dwells.

While Graham quotes Rom 3:23; 6:23, and Isa 59:2, all of which mention sin, he never uses the word in his explanatory comments on step two. The title for his step two reveals this emphasis: "The Problem: Our Separation."^ For Graham, it is primarily the separation that must be bridged so that the desired peace and abundant life can be enjoyed.

The "problem" or "obstacle" that stands in the way of the desirable good is as follows. For Kennedy, it is our sin, which God must punish with death because he is just; this means we will be separated from God through all of eternity and never get into heaven. For Bright, the problem is also our sin, which separates us from God and the good life he offers. For Graham, the problem is sin once again, but he especially focuses on the resulting separation from God and, thus, from the abundant life he offers.

1Ibid.

2Graham, "Steps to Peace."

3Ibid.
At this point, each of the presentations moves to the solution to this problem of sin and separation.

The Solution Is Explained

After painting sinful humanity into a corner, doomed to death and separation from God and, thus, unable to realize heaven and a good life, each of these presentations moves to the solution to the human dilemma.

Kennedy says, “God solved this problem for us in the Person of . . . Jesus Christ.”

Two aspects of Jesus are mentioned: His divinity and his passion. “He is the infinite God-Man” who “died on the cross to pay the penalty for our sins and rose from the grave to purchase a place for us in heaven.” After quoting Isa 53:6, EE concludes, “Jesus Christ bore our sin in His body on the cross and now offers you eternal life (heaven) as a free gift.”

For Bright, the solution to the “great gulf” which separates God and man is presented in law three: “Jesus Christ is God’s ONLY provision for Man’s sin. Through Him you can know and experience God’s love and plan for your life.” Bright then highlights three facts regarding Christ: his substitutionary death “in our place,” his

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5Bright, “Have You Heard?” Emphasis original.

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resurrection, and his position as "the Only Way to God." Bright then includes a second diagram of the gulf separating "God" above and "man" below. In it a large cross labeled "Jesus" spans the gulf. Bright explains, "This diagram illustrates that God had bridged the gulf which separates us from Him by sending His Son, Jesus Christ, to die on the cross in our place to pay the penalty for our sins."1

Graham also presents the solution in his third step, which is entitled: "God’s Bridge: The Cross."2 He explains, "Jesus Christ died on the Cross and rose from the grave. He paid the penalty for our sin and bridged the gap between God and people."3 Like Bright, Graham returns to his previous illustration. This time, however, there is a bridge across the chasm which separates God and man, and at the center of the bridge is a cross.

Clearly, in all three presentations, the decisive solution is the death of Jesus Christ on the cross to pay the penalty for our sins. This is the salvific event—the heart of the gospel according to Kennedy, Bright, and Graham. But the fact that the solution has been provided by God is not enough. Each presentation specifies that there must be something more.

A Personal Response Is Requested

Each of the three presentations suggests that, for the promised, desirable end (heaven, peace, abundant life) to be attained, the individual must respond to the solution

1Ibid.

2Graham, "Steps to Peace."

3Ibid.
provided (Jesus' death on the cross for our sins). In other words, the facts of Jesus Christ's provision have no benefits unless one responds appropriately.

For Kennedy, the response required is “faith,” which is “the key that opens the door to heaven.”¹ This “saving faith” is defined as “trusting in Jesus Christ alone for eternal life. It means resting upon Christ alone and what he has done rather than in what you or I have done to get us into heaven.”²

The issue is then put directly to the sinner. “Would you like to receive the gift of eternal life?”³ EE specifies exactly what is involved in this acceptance. The potential convert is instructed to do four things:

1. Transfer your trust
2. Accept Christ as Savior
3. Receive Jesus Christ as Lord
4. Repent⁴

If the individual wants to receive the benefit of eternal life, he or she is then encouraged to pray this suggested prayer: “Lord Jesus Christ, I know I am a sinner and do not deserve eternal life. But, I believe you died and rose from the grave to purchase a place in heaven for me. Lord Jesus, come into my life; take control of my life; forgive my

sins and save me. I repent of my sins and now place my trust in You for my salvation. I accept the free gift of eternal life.”

Whereas Kennedy’s required response was “faith,” Bright calls for all to “receive Christ.” Law four states: “We must individually RECEIVE Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord; then we can know and experience God’s love and plan for our lives.” Receiving Christ is done “through faith” and by a “personal invitation.” Bright summarizes: “Receiving Christ involves turning to God from self (repentance) and trusting Christ to come into our lives to forgive our sins and to make us what He wants us to be. Just to agree intellectually that Jesus Christ is the Son of God and that He died on the cross for our sins is not enough. Nor is it enough to have an emotional experience. We receive Jesus Christ by faith, as an act of the will.”

Like Kennedy, Bright suggests that the actual reception of Christ comes through prayer and can happen “right now.” His suggested prayer is as follows: “Lord Jesus, I need You. Thank You for dying on the cross for my sins. I open the door of my life and receive You as my Savior and Lord. Thank You for forgiving my sins and giving me eternal life. Take control of the throne of my life. Make me the kind of person You want me to be.”

2Bright, “Have You Heard?”
3Ibid. Emphasis original.
4Ibid.
5Ibid.
Like Bright, Graham uses the phrase "receive Christ" to describe the essence of the individual's response to the gospel. Step four is entitled; "Our Response: Receive Christ." This is accomplished when we "trust Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and receive him by personal invitation." Like Bright, Graham urges us to receive Jesus "right now" by following four specific steps.

1. Admit your need (I am a sinner).
2. Be willing to turn from your sins (repent).
3. Believe that Jesus Christ died for you on the Cross and rose from the grave.
4. Through prayer, invite Jesus Christ to come in and control your life through the Holy Spirit. (Receive Him as Lord and Savior.)

Finally, as did the others, Graham provides a model prayer: "Dear Lord Jesus, I know that I am a sinner and need Your forgiveness. I believe that You died for my sins, I want to turn from my sins. I now invite You to come into my heart and life. I want to trust and follow You as Lord and Savior. In Jesus' name, Amen."

The Correct Response Brings the Desirable Good

After responding to the gospel by praying the provided prayer, each of the three presentations promises that something has happened. There is the clear implication that, if the necessary response has been made, the desirable good which has been promised (heaven, peace, abundance) will now be possessed.

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1Graham, "Steps to Peace."
2Ibid.
3Ibid.
4Ibid.
5Ibid.
In addition, all three presentations explicitly assure the new convert of immediate salvation. Kennedy and Graham also specifically mention the convert’s new status as a part of God’s family. Bright includes the longest list of assurances. The moment a sinner receives Christ by faith, Bright promises that:

1. Christ came into your life.
2. Your sins were forgiven.
3. You became a child of God.
4. You received eternal life.
5. You began the great adventure for which God created you.

Future Expectations Are Articulated

Finally, each presentation expects the recipient of salvation to do something more. Their being saved implies additional responsibilities. All three presentations mention five tasks for the new believer.

1. Read the Bible (both Kennedy and Bright suggest beginning with John)
2. Pray
3. Worship at a Christian church
4. Fellowship with other Christians
5. Witness to others about Jesus.

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2Bright, “Now That You.”
4Four other expectations were mentioned by only one of the presentations. Bright calls respondents to (1) “obey God moment by moment,” (2) “trust God for every detail of your life” and (3) allow the Holy Spirit “to control and empower your daily life and witness.” Bright, “Now That You.” Emphasis original. In his “Steps to Peace,” Graham makes this appeal: “As Christ’s representative in a needy world, demonstrate your new life by your love and concern for others.”
These expectations are presented as separate from the reception of salvation. Salvation is announced, assurances are given, and then these steps are given as ways to maximize what has already been experienced. Kennedy presents them as ways “you can grow spiritually.” Bright calls them “suggestions” that will help “to enjoy your new life to the fullest,” and Graham describes them as things that “should” be done.\(^\text{1}\)

Summary

Although these three presentations of the plan of salvation are not identical, they are strikingly similar. Taken as a whole, this is the gospel which brings salvation according to Kennedy, Bright, and Graham.

1. A desirable good is presented: God is depicted as a God who loves humans and offers them a wonderful life of peace, joy, and abundance, both now and through eternity in heaven.

2. The desirable good is not attained: Attention is drawn to the fact that this “good life” is not a present reality for most people. To make matters worse, heaven cannot be attained with human effort.

3. The problem is presented: The reason for this is rather simple: human sin. All have sinned, and this sin separates humanity from a holy God and brings the penalty of death.


\(^\text{2}\)Bright, “Now That You.”

\(^\text{3}\)Graham, “Steps to Peace.”
4. The solution is explained: God sent Jesus Christ as the solution for the sin problem. Jesus Christ died on the cross to pay the penalty for humanity's sins. The cross makes it possible for God to forgive sin and, thus, the cross also bridges the gulf which separates humanity from God.

5. A personal response is requested: The solution God brings is of no benefit unless the individual chooses to respond, in faith, by receiving Christ, believing he died for sin, and trusting that this death makes forgiveness and salvation possible. This individual response is made by praying a suggested prayer.

6. The correct response brings the desirable good: The one who has received Christ is assured that he or she now possesses eternal life and is a part of God's family. The separation has been bridged and the person can now experience a wonderful life of peace, joy, and abundance.

7. Future expectations are articulated: The suggestions for living that the now-saved individual should follow include Bible reading, prayer, worship and fellowship at a Christian church, and witnessing to others about Jesus.

This, in succinct, summary form, is the way of salvation as it is presented by Kennedy, Bright, and Graham, and it is this salvation formula which has been widely accepted and used in America. Many have come to know Christ and salvation as a direct result of this formula. Is is not surprising, then, that for many evangelicals, this is the very core of the gospel.

An Analysis of the Dominant Evangelical Gospel Presentation in America

It is now time to take a closer look at a number of characteristics, either explicit or
implicit, expressed or implied, in this dominant, seven-step presentation of the gospel.

These are the ten characteristics which will later be critiqued from the perspective of communication theory and the New Testament books of Luke and Acts.

One: The Uniformity of the Message

The similarities between these three dominant presentations (and their widespread adoption by other authors) have already been mentioned. A quick, side-by-side, verbatim comparison between the first of the four spiritual laws and the first of the four “Steps to Peace with God” will graphically reinforce this basic point once again.

Note the nearly identical structural, thematic, verbal, and biblical parallels.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>“Four Laws”</th>
<th>“Steps to Peace”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Law 1: God LOVES you and offers</td>
<td>Step 1: God loves you and wants you</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a wonderful PLAN for your life.</td>
<td>to experience peace and life.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John 3:16</td>
<td>Rom 5:1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John 10:10</td>
<td>John 3:16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Why is it that most people are not
experiencing the abundant life?
Because . . .

Why don’t most people have this
peace and abundant life that God
planned for us to have?

These three approaches, and especially Bright and Graham’s presentations, are demonstrably similar.

Two: The Resistance to Change

It is important to note the relative age of this dominant presentation of the gospel.

In 1970, Kennedy revealed that his approach grew out of nine years of experience as pastor of the Coral Ridge Presbyterian church. In other words, his message was honed in the 1960s. The Four Spiritual Laws were first published in 1965 and, according to
Bright, had been “developed as a result of over 20 years of experience in counseling with
tens of thousands of college students on the campuses of the world, as well as with a
comparable number of laymen and pastors.” Finally, Graham’s “Steps to Peace with

All three authors had ministries that first grew and flourished in the 1950s and
60s, and their programs grew out of success with people of their era: those born in the
1920s and 1930s. The dominant evangelical gospel formula, then, was originally crafted
for individuals who, in the year 2004, would be in their seventies and eighties.

Three: The Focus on the Individual

The third characteristic is a focus on the salvation of the individual. Each of the
three dominant approaches was designed to be used in one-on-one witnessing, so an
individualistic context is easily understood. The personal, individualistic focus goes
beyond the mere context of the encounter, however. The very content of the messages as
it is communicated is individualistic in focus. The point of concern is salvation, not for
one’s family, community, or world, but rather, “a place in heaven for you.”

In EE’s gospel outline, this individualistic perspective begins with the two
introductory questions: “Do you know for sure that you are going to be with God in
heaven?” and “If God were to ask you, ‘Why should I let you into my heaven?’” what

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would you say?"¹ This emphasis continues throughout. The suggested prayer near the conclusion of the presentation is particularly illustrative: “Lord Jesus Christ, I know I am a sinner and do not deserve eternal life. But, I believe you died and rose from the grave to purchase a place in heaven for me. Lord Jesus, come into my life; take control of my life; forgive my sins and save me. I repent of my sins and now place my trust in You for my salvation. I accept the free gift of eternal life.”²

Then, EE provides a “spiritual birth certificate.” The certificate is similar to the prayer in its first-person-singular perspective. In addition to the overt, first-person-singular language of the certificate (“give me eternal life”), there is the implicit assumption that twins or triplets are not born into the family of God, for, at the bottom of the certificate, there is a request (and space provided) for only one signature. There are no witnesses to the birth, even. It is an entirely private, personal, individual event.³

This focus on the individual is evident in Bright’s four spiritual laws as well. The presentation begins with “God LOVES you and has a wonderful PLAN for your life.”⁴ It is not a plan for the world, or for one’s family or community, but for the individual.


⁴Bright, “Have You Heard?” Emphasis supplied.
Since this is the case, it is only fitting that law four says, "We must individually RECEIVE Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord."\(^1\)

Following the presentation proper, the individual is assured that five things have happened. Each of the five elements happens specifically to "you" (singular).\(^2\)

Billy Graham also maintains an individualistic focus. Step One says, "God loves you and wants you to experience peace and life—abundant and eternal."\(^3\) Once again, the starting point is you—God’s love and desire for the individual—not God’s love and desire for one’s family or for all his creation.

This focus on the individual is also evident in the illustrations that are used. In their depiction of the salvation experience, both Bright and Graham present a bridge (the cross) which spans the gulf of separation between God and humanity. In each case, a solitary individual is crossing the bridge. No one walks with the individual and no one waits to receive the person who arrives on God’s side. The journey is a solitary one.

ATS tracts further illustrate this individualistic emphasis. One of the top five evangelism tracts begins with a man’s dream sequence.\(^4\) He stands at the head of a single-file line before the gate of heaven. God, who holds a feather pen, asks, "Why should I let you in?" When the man fails to provide the correct answer, God says, "See ya!" and the man suddenly drops down through the clouds, towards the fires of hell. As

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\(^1\)Ibid. Emphasis supplied.

\(^2\)Bright, "Now That You."

\(^3\)Graham, "Steps to Peace." Emphasis supplied.

\(^4\)Wheeler, Heaven’s Gate.
he tumbles through space, he shouts, “What must I do to be saved?” He wakes up from his dream and finds himself alone in bed. A Bible falls from the shelf above and lands on his head. He opens it and is led through the four spiritual laws. Then, still in his pajamas and still alone, he prays, “Lord, I believe,” and is saved. The entire tract is focused on one man. No other human being is pictured. The perspective of the salvation experience in this tract is clear: it is a private process between the individual and God. It need not include any other human being, but can be accomplished in total isolation from others.

For some, this individualism is viewed as positive. According to Ken Anderson, “in its most effective function, soul-winning is a one-man-to-one-man procedure.” Even the phrase “soul-winning” in itself is revealing. It illustrates the underlying assumption that an evangelist wins individuals, soul by soul.

This individualism, in all likelihood, lies behind the witnessing training manual that suggests that, “in a decision visit, if one person in a home desires to hear the gospel and another is evidently not interested, one of the trainees can help by asking the uninterested one whether he would show him the yard or workshop.” Clearly, “a commitment to Christ is an individual decision,” so much so that a family member who seems uninterested is removed, leaving the new Christian to take this most important step in total isolation.

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3Ibid., 98.
Four: The Assumption of Certain Audience
Attitudes and Beliefs

At the time when the dominant gospel presentations were formulated, Americans had relatively uniform understandings of words such as God, sin, and heaven. Not only were these words understood, but the connotative meanings of such words were also relatively stable. The presentations of the gospel also assumed that the audience knew biblical stories, including the one of Jesus and his crucifixion. The fact that Kennedy, Bright, and Graham do not explain their use of such words and concepts is in itself an indication of their understanding of such a widespread consensus.

Five: The Promise of the Good Life

The evangelical gospel formula promises the “good life” to each individual who accepts the message which is given. In each of the three presentations, receiving Christ (and thus, salvation) is a way to get something good. The gospel centers on God’s offer of a wonderful, abundant life that is to be “enjoyed.”^1 The one who receives Christ is now ready to begin “the great adventure for which God created you.”^2 Graham implies that this is God’s overarching goal or purpose—his desire is that we “experience peace and life—abundant and eternal.”^3

This theme is carried out in a graphic manner in the materials of the American Tract Society. Their tracts suggest that a number of benefits will accrue to the one who

^1 Bright, “Now That You.”

^2 Ibid.

^3 Graham, “Steps to Peace.”
has accepted salvation. In addition to the frequent promises of eternal life,\(^1\) heaven,\(^2\) a relationship with God,\(^3\) and salvation,\(^4\) other benefits mentioned include happiness,\(^5\) a


\(^5\) Terry and Terry; Dave Branon, *Football and the Post-Game Kneel* (Garland, TX: American Tract Society, 1998); *Michael Chang*.
wonderful new life, an enhanced career, power, and peace. Receiving Jesus Christ appears to be a decision that brings the “good life.” Apparently, this is the life all deserve, the life all should have, and the life all can have if they become Christians. All one must do is receive Christ. Christianity, then, is held out as something that serves and benefits the individual.

Six: The Emphasis on Knowledge and Information

According to Kennedy, Bright, and Graham, the gospel is best summarized as a five-point outline, or four laws or sequential steps. The gospel is information that is to be known. Kennedy asks, “Did you know that the Bible tells how you can know for sure that you have eternal life . . . ? Here’s how: the Bible says there are 5 things you need to know about eternal life.” EE’s internet version of the gospel presentation includes the question “Do you know??” as the heading across the top of each page. So, in both the introduction and every subsequent page, there is the suggestion that obtaining salvation is primarily about knowing “five things.”

Bright’s presentation is perhaps less focused on “knowing,” but it still begins with

1Graham, New Millennium; idem, Christmas: A Time For Peace (Garland, TX: American Tract Society, 2000); Lindsay Terry, The Amazing Story Behind “Amazing Grace” (Garland, TX: American Tract Society, 1996); Ya’ Gotta Get; Conrad; Salser, If We Never.

2Schuh.

3Power!; Branon.


a knowledge question, "Have you heard of the four spiritual laws?" In other words, the message is for those who do not know, and, from the very outset, its implicit purpose is to provide information. However, after presenting the first three laws, the reader is told, "It is not just to know these three laws..." In addition, one must respond, but the result of this response is "to know that Christ is in your life." The Bible makes is possible to "know that God has answered your prayer. Furthermore, "You can know on the basis of his promise that Christ lives in you." So, even a relationship with Christ—and his dwelling within—is not felt or sensed, but is known on the basis of a proposition of Scripture.

Bright goes so far as to warn the new convert that, since the assurance of salvation is based on the authority of the Bible, one should "not depend on feelings." Bright illustrates this with a train consisting of three labeled cars: FACT (the engine), FAITH, and FEELINGS (the caboose). The point of this illustration is that "as Christians, we do not depend on feelings or emotions, but we place our faith (trust) in the trustworthiness of God and the promises of His Word." While Bright would certainly acknowledge that

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1Bright, "Have You Heard?" Emphasis supplied.
2Bright, "Now That You." Emphasis supplied.
3Ibid. Emphasis supplied.
4Ibid. Emphasis original. This section of Bright's presentation borrows heavily from Billy Graham's Peace with God (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1953), 143-149. There, Graham writes: "Let me give you, then, three words, three words that must always be kept in the same order and never re-arranged. These words are fact, faith, and feeling" (145). If kept in their proper order, Graham asserts that the assurance of one's salvation is possible. Feeling, however, "is the last of the three words, and it must remain last in your thinking" (146).
5Bright, "Now That You."
emotions can be a part of the conversion experience, he also believes that some may not feel anything. For him, after all, the gospel is not a moving narrative but four “spiritual laws” which are said to “govern” one’s relationship with God. Thus, in the face of what is supposed to be amazing, life-altering good news, the new believer is not expected to feel too much, but rather, to make a logical decision based on the authoritative Word of God.

Seven: The Call for an Abstract Response

Each presentation calls for the recipients of the message to respond in certain ways. In other words, they must “do” something in order to attain salvation.

A review of these key imperatives reveals the abstract, intellectual nature of the requested response. What must one do to be saved? The most common imperative is the call for the seeker to “receive Christ.” This call to “receive” is repeated twenty-two times in the three dominant presentations. But what does one do to receive Christ? Once again, the abstract imperative “receive” is explained by additional abstract imperatives. Kennedy calls the sinner to “transfer trust” to Christ, “accept” Christ as Savior, “receive” Jesus Christ as Lord, and to “be willing to turn from anything that is not pleasing to Him,” which Kennedy defines as repentance. Bright implores the unbeliever to “receive Jesus

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1 Bright, “Have You Heard?”


3 Ibid.


5 Ibid.
Christ by faith, as an act of the will."\(^1\) Graham says there are four things one does to receive Christ: admit need, be willing to turn from sin, believe Jesus died and rose from the dead, and invite Jesus to come in and control one’s life.\(^2\)

Within these three presentations, the most popular response called for is to “receive,” followed by appeals to “believe” and “trust.” Other words include calls to “yield,” “agree,” “admit,” “call on,” and “accept.” A review of the top five evangelism tracts from the American Tract Society reveals this same pattern. The top three imperatives once again are “receive,” “believe,” and “trust.” Other calls include appeals for the sinner to “accept,” “acknowledge,” “call on,” “invite Jesus in,” “open our hearts,” “depend on Jesus,” and “take a step of faith.”

Once again, the sinner is called to respond in abstract, cerebral, even metaphorical language. These terms are inactive in that they are “done” internally and intellectually. Often, they do not constitute an active mental task, but rather, a passive acknowledgment or intellectual assent of something (“receive,” “admit,” “believe,” “accept,” etc.). They do not involve bodily motion or emotion.

Even the occasional call to “repent” is not clearly an active response. Kennedy explains his call to repent by saying the sinner must “be willing to turn from anything that is not pleasing to Him [Christ].”\(^3\) Bright defines repentance as “turning to God from

\(^1\)Bright, “Have You Heard?”

\(^2\)Graham, “Steps to Peace.”

Graham says to repent is to “be willing to turn from your sins”; although the verb “turn” suggests action, it is clearly a mental shift that is expected. In fact, what is called for is not necessarily a mental change, but rather, a willingness to change.

There is, however, one response that is more active and concrete, and it is called for by each of the three dominant presentations (and most of the ATS tracts). This is the call to pray. This is the one thing the sinner can do in an active, tangible way. In every case, however, a suggested prayer is provided, and the content of this prayer is basically a verbal re-affirmation that one has intellectually agreed to the propositions of the presentation. In other words, the only truly active response required is a verbalization of one’s intellectual assent to receive, believe, trust, accept, and acknowledge Christ.

For Bright, however, this verbalization is not even necessary. In his instructions to the presenter of the four laws, he suggests that, “if the person wishes to pray silently, you may suggest that he close his prayer with an audible ‘amen.’”

In short, it is possible for a sinner to “respond” to Christ and “receive” Him without any expression of emotion and only one external sign: verbalizing the word “amen.” After uttering this four-letter word, the sinner may then be assured of salvation.

Eight: The Supposition of Separation between God and Humanity

The theme of separation between God and humanity dominates the typical gospel

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1Bright, “Have You Heard?”

2Graham, “Steps to Peace.”

presentation in North America today. God and sinful humanity are consistently depicted as far apart. In fact, God cannot even approach sin because of his holiness.

Humans who have not received Christ are effectively barred from any contact or relationship with God and are not able to experience the subsequent life of peace and abundance that this relationship brings.

Although the Old Testament is infrequently quoted by Kennedy, Bright, Graham, and the top five ATS evangelism tracts, when it is quoted, the most popular passage is Isa 59:2: “But your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear.”

Only after one receives Christ is this chasm of separation between God and humanity bridged and one becomes a child of God. As has already been noted, in each of these presentations, salvation comes when a vertical relationship with God is restored. What is broken is the individual’s connection with God.

The key to establishing this vertical relationship is to somehow deal with sin and its resulting separation. While sin is mentioned by all presentations, there is no mention of subsequent guilt or sorrow for this sin. Sin, then, makes it impossible to experience the “good life” of peace and abundance, but it apparently does not leave one guilty or sorrowful. Furthermore, no presentation expects the individual to stop sinning. In fact,

1 This passage is quoted in Wheeler, Heaven’s Gate; Power!; Graham, Steps to Peace; and idem, “Steps to Peace.”

this is a stated impossibility.\textsuperscript{1} Certainly, there is the appeal to be willing to turn from sin and live God’s way, but the focus is not on eliminating sin, but rather, bridging the separation caused by sin through forgiveness. Sin remains, but the penalty of death is avoided. In other words, the disease of sin is not cured, but its effect (separation) is negated. Forgiveness is not a miracle \textit{cure} for sin, but rather, a miracle \textit{treatment} for sin.

Nine: The Presentation of the Cross as the Salvific Event

In the typical evangelical gospel presentation, the salvific event is clearly the substitutionary death of Jesus Christ on the cross to pay the penalty for humanity’s sins. Salvation flows from the cross.

This is illustrated by the ways in which Christ is referred to in the three dominant presentations. Christ’s death is referred to twenty-five times,\textsuperscript{2} his resurrection seven times; mention of his life is made only once. This focus is best summed up by Kennedy, who depicts a sinner receiving salvation as a human figure clutching a cross.\textsuperscript{3}

Ten: The Use of the Bible as an Authority

In the explanation of the gospel and the response required by the sinner, each of the presentations frequently quotes passages from the Bible. Kennedy includes fifteen

\textsuperscript{1}Kennedy, “Do You Know?” http://www.eeinternational.org/DYKFS/English/DYK_Eng_7.htm.

\textsuperscript{2}This includes the eight visual references (depictions of the cross, for example) made.

direct quotations, Graham thirteen, and Bright ten. A close look at these quotations reveals some interesting patterns.

Only three passages appeared in all three presentations: Rom 3:23; 6:23a; and Rev 3:20. Six passages appeared in two of the presentations: John 1:12; 3:16; 10:10, Rom 5:8; 6:23b; and Eph 2:8, 9. The greatest similarity existed between Bright and Graham, both of whose presentations cited seven identical passages.

Where do these citations come from? Of the total of thirty-eight quotations, thirty-two came from the New Testament. In fact, Bright never quoted the Old Testament, and Graham did so only twice. Within the New Testament itself, the writings of Paul were quoted most frequently. He was quoted sixteen times, and twelve of these citations were from the book of Romans. John was quoted thirteen times, making him the second most frequently cited author. Eight of these quotations were from the Gospel of John, three were from Revelation, and two from 1 John. There were only three other New Testament authors quoted, and each of these three was cited only once: Matthew, Luke, and Peter.

The gospel, then, is clearly presented as a New Testament gospel. Second, it is the gospel according to Paul and John. Even more specifically, it is the gospel according to the book of Romans. The synoptic Gospels (which contain 68 chapters) are cited only once, whereas Romans (which contains only 16 chapters) is quoted twelve times. (This equals an average of less than 0.015 citations per chapter, whereas Romans averages 0.75

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1This count includes only the quotations prior to the final prayer. Following this prayer, each presentation includes a few more texts, but these are not a part of the actual explanation of the gospel and the required response, but rather, additional points of exhortation or encouragement after the experience of salvation.
Most notably absent from the list of citations is Luke. Based on word count, Luke is the most prolific New Testament author and contributed approximately one fourth of the entire New Testament material. Yet his work (the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts), which is especially concerned with evangelism and conversion, is cited only once.

A Concluding Question

During the “Tell—Scotland” evangelistic initiative of the mid-1950s, a minister who planned on being active in the campaign wrote to headquarters in Glasgow, “We have our committees organized, our literature prepared, our schedules set, our promotion underway. We are ready now to take part in ‘Tell—Scotland.’ But, pray tell me, what are we to tell Scotland?”

D. James Kennedy, Bill Bright, and Billy Graham have done their best to make sure evangelicals in North America never have to ask this question. They have provided a succinct presentation of the plan of salvation so that Christians have something to tell the rest of America. For approximately forty years, evangelicals have presented this message to those who want to know how they may become a Christian and be saved.

The question which must now be addressed is this: Does this traditional presentation communicate effectively with Americans at the turn of the millennium? It is this question that I will address in the following two chapters.

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Chapter 3 presented the seven steps of the evangelical gospel presentation most often delivered to spiritual seekers in America, together with comments on ten of its outstanding characteristics. The question which must now be addressed is this: Does this dominant gospel presentation communicate to contemporary North Americans with clarity and impact? In other words, do people understand what evangelicals say about how to be saved and are they likely to be motivated to respond?

In this chapter, I begin to answer this question by first reviewing the status of evangelistic communication in America. Second, I explore the communication process itself, noting in particular that an effective message is constructed and delivered with the intended audience in mind. Finally, I note that the American audience may be misrepresented by social commentators who fail to consider survey data from Americans themselves.

The Status of Evangelistic Communication in America

Communication is a complex process that defies any attempt at a simple
explanation. John Bluck rightly observes that “even the simplest definition of communication invites an argument.” A cursory perusal of communications literature reveals the wide variety of definitions and models that are employed in attempts to better describe the various components of communication.

In spite of the many models which attempt to describe how communication works, there is basic agreement that communication is successful “when a message has been transmitted and the intended point is grasped by another.” Put another way, the goal of

1In hyperbolic language, Melvin LeFleur suggests that, although “the communication process is utterly fundamental to all our psychological and social processes, . . . we know less about it than we do about the life cycle of the bat or the chemical composition of the sediment on the ocean floor.” Melvin LeFleur, *Theories of Mass Communication*, 2d ed. (New York: David McKay, 1970), 76; quoted in David J. Hesselgrave, *Communicating Christ Cross-Culturally*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1981), 39.


4Viggo Sogaard, *Media in Church and Mission* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey, 1993), 30. This definition correctly suggests that communication will be approached predominantly from the perspective of the “process school” rather than the “school of semiotics.” Essentially, the process school is most concerned with the accurate transmission of messages in an interpersonal communication transaction, and it is this approach which serves as the foundation for most studies on Christian communication.
communication is "to bring a receptor to understand a message presented by a
communicator in a way that substantially corresponds with the intent of the
communicator."1

Communication is not merely the broadcasting of a message. The transmission of
words (or other symbols) does not mean that communication has taken place—or that it
will take place. This can be graphically illustrated by the current situation in the United
States, where hundreds of Christian radio and television stations broadcast their Christian
message to the nation on a daily basis.2 Sales of Christian music and literature in the
United States exceed 1 billion dollars annually.3 Information such as this has led
Christian pollster George Barna to conclude that, although there are a multitude of non-

1Kraft, Christianity in Culture, 147. It is an oversimplification to think of a
communicator and receptor as two static entities. Communication is a process which
involves constant interaction between sender and receiver. They are both sending and
receiving messages (verbal or otherwise) and are together "participants in the
communication process." Everett M. Rogers and Thomas M. Steinfatt, Intercultural
Communication (Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland, 1999), 116. Burgoon, Hunsaker, and
Dawson go so far as to say that "the distinctions between source and receiver are arbitrary
labels at best" (13). For the purposes of clarity and simplicity, however, terms such as
sender and receiver, communicator and receptor will be used throughout this paper. The
reader will also note my occasional use of sources which deal with communication theory
from a cross-cultural perspective. This is mindfully and responsibly done, for the basic
principles of communication theory are identical in all situations and "all communication
is cross-cultural to some degree." Donald K. Smith, Creating Understanding: A
Handbook for Christian Communication across Cultural Landscapes (Grand Rapids, MI:
Zondervan, 1992), 8.

2For a listing of these many stations and their locations, see Edythe Draper, ed.,
The Almanac of the Christian World (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1990), 656-668.

3Barna, Evangelism That Works, 35.
religious messages available to Americans, “the evangelistic theme is undeniably present in the marketplace at all times.”¹ David Barrett, statistician on the global status of Christian mission, describes the United States as “the world’s most-evangelized country,”² where citizens are saturated with opportunities to hear the gospel.³

If America is indeed saturated with religious communication, it would be tempting to conclude that the gospel has in fact been clearly communicated to North Americans. However, research reveals that this may not be the case. In the 1990s, Barna asked Americans to explain or define the term “gospel.” Faced with the challenge of describing this most basic Christian term, only about one third of Americans provided an explanation that was close to being correct. Half of these “correct” answers defined “gospel” as the first four books of the New Testament.⁴ This means that, in a country where nearly 90 percent of the population consider themselves Christian,⁵ fewer than one in five understand the gospel to be “the good news of Jesus’ death and resurrection undertaken to save people from their sins.”⁶

Barna emphasizes that exposure to the gospel does not mean one has truly heard the gospel message.⁷ If the question is whether or not Americans have been exposed to

¹Ibid.
²Barrett, 74.
³Ibid., 71-76.
⁴Barna, Evangelism That Works, 36.
⁵Ibid., 37.
⁶Ibid., 36.
⁷Ibid., 39.
the gospel, the answer must be yes. But if the question is whether Americans have heard the gospel, then the answer must be a resounding no.¹

Barna concludes: “We have learned that being exposed to information does not mean that people absorb it, understand it, or embrace it. . . . Most Americans may have heard key phrases or principles from the Bible, but if they are able to recall those expressions, they remain baffled about what those terms mean.”²

Key Concepts in Communication Theory

Apparently, there are numerous Christian messages transmitted by well-meaning Christian communicators in America, yet many Americans remain relatively ignorant about spiritual matters.³ Communication theory provides insight into why this is the case. Key issues relate to selective filters, receptor-oriented communication, and communicating with impact. A brief study of these concepts follows.

Selective Filters

When exposed to a message, a three-step, selective filtering process occurs in the mind of the receptor. The first of these filters is attention. Faced with a veritable smorgasbord of sensory stimuli, the potential receptor must identify the message as important enough to attend to it. The second filter is comprehension. This means that the


²Barna, Evangelism That Works, 35.

³Theodore Baehr posits that if the producers of religious programming believe they are effectively reaching non-religious Americans, “they are fooling themselves.” Getting the Word Out (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986), 84.
content of the message must be understandable so that the receptor can decode and process the information. The third filter is retention. This simply means that, if the message calls for some sort of response or action, the receptor must remember the message if such action is to take place.¹

According to Viggo Sogaard, “all of these stages in the filtering process are selective, that is, it is the receiver who controls the filter, deciding to open or close.”² In other words, the intended recipient of a message is the final arbiter of whether or not a message is heard and communication actually occurs.

This helps to explain why the transmission of the gospel message, though available to all in North America, has not been truly heard. At any filtering stage, the message can be “lost” to the receptor, even if the message is sent. Receptors may hear the gospel, but never attend to it. If they do attend to the message, they may find words and concepts that they do not fully comprehend. Finally, even if the message can be understood by the receptor, if it is viewed as unreliable, irrelevant, or even simply mundane, the content of the message will not be retained and the receptor will not act upon what he or she has heard.

Apparently, this is what often occurs in North America. Christian communicators have made the gospel available to non-Christians, but the receptors’ selective filters

¹Sogaard, Media, 44. See also Burgoon, Hunsaker, and Dawson, 111-120.
²Sogaard, Media, 44.
have rendered that message ineffectual. In short, the gospel message has not been presented with optimum clarity and power.

Receptor-Oriented Communication

Since the focus of this study is on the spiritual seeker who wants to know what to do to be saved, such a person is probably already prepared to attend to the message. Thus, my particular interest is in how the gospel can pass through the second and third filters, the filters of comprehension and retention. Communication theory suggests that this can best be accomplished if a message is constructed and delivered in such a way that it is receptor oriented.

The importance of receptor-oriented communication can be better established by looking at the basic building blocks of communication: words. First, it must be recognized that words have no meaning in and of themselves.\(^1\) Words are merely symbols. People attach meanings to these symbols, but the words themselves do not carry meaning.\(^2\) For this reason, "the same word or phrase may have an entirely different meaning for the speaker and the listener."\(^3\) In fact, because no two minds are identical, "no two people invest a particular word with exactly the same meaning."\(^4\) Hesselgrave

\(^1\)David J. Hesselgrave and Edward Rommen, *Contextualization* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1989), 188.

\(^2\)Kraft, *Communication Theory*, 33-35.


and Rommen describe it in this way: "The source of a message entertains an idea which he or she then expresses in the words and phrases of a language code, but the meaning stays in the source's head. The receptor is stimulated by the words and phrases (the message) that he or she decodes into a certain meaning which, in turn, corresponds more or less to the meaning entertained by the source. But the meaning is to be located in the two minds, not in the message."

In spite of this, there is a tendency, even among educators (and perhaps especially among educators), to put "an inordinate amount of emphasis on speaker characteristics and effective message construction." In other words, there is the tendency to focus on the right words to use rather than on the meanings the receptors will attach to those words. This focus on selecting the "accurate" word also tends to overlook the importance of a word's deeper, connotative meaning, and this is often the central meaning of a word or message.

Thus, communicators must be cognizant of the receptor's interpretational reflexes

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1Hesselgrave and Rommen, 188.

2Burgoon, Hunsaker, and Dawson, 71.

3"A single-minded attempt at exact language neglects the fact that language is necessarily ambiguous, since it arises from our unique experience." Kenneth Hamilton, Words and the Word (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1971), 90. The overarching emphasis is simply that the communicator must be aware that a dictionary definition of a word is not the final arbiter of meaning. George L. Dillon, for example, demonstrates that the same word, used by the same person, contains what he calls an "extralogical" meaning which is affected by its position in a given sentence. "The Meaning of a Word," in Language: Introductory Readings, ed. Virginia P. Clark, Paul A. Eschholz, and Alfred F. Rosa, 5th ed. (New York: St. Martins, 1994), 435.


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which provide culturally conditioned, automatic, deep level "understandings" of various terms and concepts. For example, in Ps 23, the Lord is compared to a good shepherd. The denotative meaning of "shepherd" as one who cares for small livestock may remain somewhat uniform from culture to culture, but the connotative meaning can be quite distinct. Thus, when certain Nigerians were first told that the Lord was like a shepherd, their interpretational reflex defined the Lord as a lunatic because in their traditional society, only very young boys and insane adults care for sheep. Speaking from the perspective of a receptor, Bluck summarizes nicely: "Meaning is something that only we ourselves can give to the message we receive. No matter how eloquently or authoritatively the message is presented, its meaning depends on how we decode it and value it."

Since this is the case, it becomes clear that the meaning of a message is as much a product of the receptor as it is of the sender. In fact, it is "the receiver rather than the sender who has the final say in defining the message." The focus of the communicator, then, should not be on the "precise formulation of the message" but on how the receptor is likely to interpret that message. Kraft describes this as "the single most threatening

\[1\] Kraft, *Christianity in Culture*, 132.
\[2\] Ibid., 133.
\[3\] Bluck, 3.
\[4\] According to Burgoon, Hunsaker, and Dawson, "Common sense and theory . . . would dictate that the receiver is just as important as the source in the communication process" (71).
\[5\] Bluck, 10.
\[6\] Kraft, *Communication Theory*, 32.
insight of contemporary communication theory for Christian communicators,"1 probably because it reveals that the meaning of a message cannot be controlled by the sender. Once the message is given, there is no guarantee that the meaning assigned by the recipient will correspond with the meaning intended by the communicator. Fortunately, substantial correspondence is within reach and communication is thus possible. That exact correspondence is not possible makes communication a challenge—especially when one is attempting to communicate a vitally important message such as the gospel.

All this establishes the crucial principle to keep in mind as one critiques the evangelical gospel presentation: An effective Christian communicator must be receptor oriented.2 Since words are only symbols that trigger meaning, and since the ultimate meaning of a message is assigned by the receptor’s mind, effective communication must keep the receptor at the center.3 Receptor orientation is, according to Sogaard, “one of the demands of an acceptable Christian communication theory.”4 Engel is even more graphic when he repeatedly refers to the audience as “sovereign.”5

Making such a statement may immediately raise concern in the minds of many Christians. It is necessary, therefore, to be clear about what this principle does not suggest. Receptor-oriented Christian communication does not mean communication that

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1Ibid., 92. Emphasis original.

2R. Hughes, 281.

3Bluck, 16.

4Sogaard, *Media*, 79.

simply panders to the various whims of the receivers. It is not a “watering down” of truth so as to bring easy compromise. To be receptor oriented is not to be receptor controlled. This theory instead calls for Christian communicators to be explicitly aware that if communication is to have any impact on a receptor, it must employ terms and concepts that the receptor can understand. A narrow focus on “the message” and “delivery systems” should be replaced with an emphasis on how receptors may interpret the message.¹

Kraft summarizes nicely: “Those who deal with communication from a Christian point of view tend to focus much more strongly on either the source of the message or the message itself than they do on the receptors. It is my contention, however, that not only does contemporary communication theory indicate a change is necessary, but the very example of Jesus demands that we be receptor-oriented.”²

Recognizing the importance of the receptor in the communication process should help Christians craft messages which will be understood by Americans. Christians who are presenting the gospel, however, desire something more than mere comprehension by receptors. Their ultimate hope is that the message will persuade the receptors and stimulate them to change their beliefs and behavior. For this selective filter to be crossed, the message must be presented with impact.

Communicating with Impact

The Christian communicator who wishes to stimulate change in receptors should

¹Hesselgrave and Rommen, 192.
²Kraft, Communication Theory, 92.
be keenly aware of the following principles. The first deals with the communicator as source of the message, the second speaks to the context in which the message is given, and finally, the third has to do with the characteristics of the message itself. As these principles are put into practice, receptors are more likely to respond positively to the message being given.

**The Source of the Message**

After focusing on the importance of the receptor in the communication transaction, it may seem odd to speak of the centrality of the communicator. It is not possible, however, to separate the messenger from the communication process. According to Eugene Nida, “The content of the message is communicated by its symbols; the value of the message is communicated by the person who produces the message.”\(^1\) In even more pointed fashion, he states that communication in close-knit communities is characterized by the fact that “just as much emphasis is given to the carrier of the information as to the content.”\(^2\)

Since this is the case, Christian communicators should not simply focus on the gospel message, but must look at themselves in light of the gospel message. Familiar folk proverbs such as “I’d rather see a sermon than hear one” and “Practice what you preach” point out the need to live a life congruent with the message one wishes to share.

Robert Don Hughes writes that “Christians must live our lives before the world in

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\(^1\)Nida, *Religion across Cultures*, 68.

\(^2\)Ibid.
a way that validates our faith. Words mean less than people mean.”¹ Ellen G. White, the most translated woman author in history, wrote, “The strongest argument in favor of Christianity is a loving and loveable Christian.”²

A relationship of mutual trust between the source and recipient is key. Marvin Mayers has written extensively on the importance of this “trust bond.” This bond serves as the foundation for true relationship, and relationship is the basis for impacting communication. If the receptor does not trust the sender of message, the receptor will not trust the message either. If there is no bond of trust, there is almost no chance for positive impact.³

The building of trust requires specific attention. Mayers posits that trust is built as Christians accept the one they are trying to reach, “even though we might disapprove of what he does.”⁴ It may sound as if Mayers is urging Christians to “lower the standards.” Mayers, though, makes an important distinction in this regard. “Even though we do not need to accept-believe what a person believes,” he writes, “we can still accept-respect what a person is and does and believes.”⁵ This openness to others results in a

¹R. Hughes, 291.
⁴Ibid., 43.
⁵Ibid., 49.
reciprocating openness, and “openness will provide fertile soil for change.”1

Closely related to the question of trust is the matter of credibility. Effective communication is possible only when the communicator has credibility with his or her audience.2 There are two major types of credibility: authoritativeness, gained by knowledge and expertise;3 and perceived integrity, credibility that comes from having admirable “character.”4 Both types are important, since receptors may place greater weight on either expertise or integrity, depending on the situation.

It is clear, however, that communicators need to have both expertise and character for maximum communicational impact.5 Leo Schreven recounts the story of a Christian woman who for many years attempted to get her husband to attend church with her. Finally her husband exploded, “We play the same lotto, gamble the same money, watch the same T.V. shows, attend the same movies, eat the same food, go to the same parties, dance every Thursday night together, drink the same scotch, smoke the same brand of cigarettes, you go to church on Sunday, I stay home and watch the football game. What’s the difference?”6

1Ibid., 55. Seamands does not use the term “trust bond,” but his point is similar as he discusses what he calls the “heart-to-heart” approach, which is “primarily concerned with people, not with the religious systems they represent”(79).

2Kraft, Christianity in Culture, 150.

3Ibid., 281.

4Ibid., 291.

5Ibid.

Clearly, Christians may have credibility of expertise, but if they lack character credibility, their message is robbed of much of its potential impact, for “the person who communicates the Christian message is, not only the vehicle of the message, but the major component of the message as well.”¹

This is true not only of the individual Christian, but of the Christian community as a whole. The community must proclaim good news with its words and by its deeds. Lesslie Newbigin expresses it this way: “How is it possible that the gospel should be credible, that people should come to believe that the power which has the last word in human affairs is represented by a man hanging on a cross? I am suggesting that the only answer, the only hermeneutic of the gospel, is a congregation of men and women who believe it and live by it.”²

One final principle should be mentioned in relation to the source of the message: the principle of common ground. Research shows that if a communicator wishes to persuasively impact receptors, common ground must be established.³ Simply stated, “People are more likely to listen to someone who is similar to them.”⁴ Communication theorists use the terms heterophily and homophily in discussing this issue. Heterophily refers to “the degree to which two or more individuals who communicate are unalike,”

¹Kraft, Communication Theory, 62.


³Seamands, 81. Seamands shares a number of ways this common ground can be established.

⁴R. Hughes, 279.
while homophily describes "the degree to which two or more individuals who communicate are alike."¹

A number of communication research studies showed that "homophilous communication is more effective than heterophilous communication."² This is particularly true when the messenger wishes to affect the behavior and value system of the receptor.³ As a receptor in some way identifies with the sender and believes that the sender understands his or her way of thinking, the potency of the message is enhanced.⁴ Unless some common ground is established between receptor and source, the communication pathway is no pathway at all.

The Context of the Communication

Donald K. Smith provides a communicational axiom: "Communication effectiveness normally decreases with increasing size of the audience."⁵ It is not surprising, then, that there is wide agreement that "face to face communication . . . is usually the most powerful form of communication."⁶ Robert Don Hughes calls this the

¹Rogers and Steinfatt, 45.
²Ibid., 46.
³Nida, Message and Mission, 215-216.
⁴R. Hughes, 280; Kraft, Christianity in Culture, 163.
⁵D. Smith, 18.
⁶Tom Nash, Christian Communicator's Handbook (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1995), 114. One of the main reasons is that face-to-face communication provides the messenger with more immediate, accurate feedback. As the audience size increases, accurate and immediate feedback decreases. This trend, if continued until "communication" becomes unidirectional, means the message "inevitably will become irrelevant. Even though it is true, it does not reach its receptor." Nida, Message and Mission, 163.
"personal word."¹ Kraft suggests that "the most impactful [sic] communication results from person-to-person interaction."²

Nida demonstrated that in vibrant Christian communities where life change is occurring within and without the church, the gospel message is transmitted as "a man-to-man kind of communication."³ As people share their spiritual values personally with others, these others are powerfully moved to respond. Nida continues, "Radio and television are excellent techniques for selling soap and cereal, . . . but they do not carry the impact of personal conviction about values."⁴ Generally speaking, the less personal the context of the communicational transaction, the less likely it is to have a lasting impact on the receptor.⁵

The Content of the Communication

After addressing the importance of the source of a message and the context in which it is delivered, the communicator who wishes to impact an audience must also pay attention to the content of the communication. Clearly, what is said is vitally important. Once more, communication theory suggests a number of principles which should assist the communicator who wishes to deliver a message with impact.

¹R. Hughes, 288.

²Kraft, Christianity in Culture, 149.

³Nida, Religion across Cultures, 69.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Kraft, Christianity in Culture, 149.
The principle of specific relevance

Communication carries greater weight when it is perceived by receptors as specifically relevant to their everyday life. General messages may not be resisted, but they will usually have minimal impact and little possibility of initiating change in receptors.¹

The two basic aspects of this principle, specificity and relevance, are easily illustrated by a hypothetical man named Tony and four buses. Suppose Tony has just finished robbing a bank. As he leaves the scene of the crime, he sees a sign on a bus that reads simply WASH. This first bus is followed by a second with a sign which says REPENT. Moments later, a third bus passes with a sign REPENT TONY. It is clear that the more specifically the message addresses Tony’s current life situation, the more power it carries. However, a fourth bus soon passes with a message that is equally specific: REPENT SUE. Obviously, the third message would carry the most impact for Tony, for, although the fourth message was specific, it was not relevant.

Christian communicators should therefore seek to be both specific and relevant to their receptors. “as is the case in all communication, the missionary message becomes most compelling when it ceases to be general and becomes relevant.”² Seamands suggests that a message becomes relevant when it addresses common needs and problems that the receptor senses in his or her own life.³

Receptors almost continually ask themselves whether or not they “need” the

¹Ibid., 150.
²Hesselgrave, Communicating Christ (1978), 138.
³Seamands, 83.
message. The communicator should ask the same question from the receptor’s frame of reference—and then adjust the message accordingly. This same emphasis is echoed by author after author. For example, Nida urges good communicators to emphasize “anticipatory feedback”\(^2\) in their communication. Nida defines this as “nothing more or less than anticipating the practical and recognized needs of those who will receive the message.”\(^3\) Baehr points out: “For us to have a powerful impact on our audience, we must ascertain and address their needs, wants and feelings by listening to them.”\(^4\) Engel points out that “it is a demonstrated communication principle that people respond when a message on any subject is shown to be relevant in terms of their basic motivations and felt needs.”\(^5\)

The discovery principle

Researchers in the field of education recognize that for deep-level learning to take place, teachers must not be mere dispensers of facts. According to veteran teacher and full-time educational consultant Donna Walker Tileston, a teacher should operate as a “coach, leader, or guide in the classroom,” providing opportunities for active student

\(^1\)D. Smith, 19. See also Kraft, *Communication Theory*, 84.

\(^2\)Nida, *Religion Across Cultures*, 68.

\(^3\)Ibid., 68-69.

\(^4\)Baehr, 20.

\(^5\)James F. Engel, *How Can I Get Them to Listen?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1977), 35. This emphasis is repeated in other Engel books. See, for example, idem, *Contemporary Christian Communications*, 31, 318; and James F. Engel and H. Wilbert Norton, *What’s Gone Wrong with the Harvest?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1975), 68-75.
participation in the learning process. She writes, "The teacher cannot continue to be the
lecturer with the students as passive listeners." \(^1\) "Active learning" demands that teachers
be willing to listen to students and involve them in the learning process.\(^2\)

The fact that true learning is a collaborative process has important implications for
Christian communicators. Adults, particularly in an individualistic society such as North
America, resent being told exactly what to believe and do. However, if a message
presents insights which reveal to receptors certain incongruities between their self-
perceptions, beliefs, and actions, and if the receptor is coached to actively address these
issues, deep-level learning and even behavior change are likely to occur. In effect, the
communicator provides information that allows the receptors to confront themselves, and
this self-confrontation motivates a person to change.\(^3\)

In a sense, then, the wise communicator will not tell all, but will show all, and
then leave space for the receptor to ponder, discover, and respond to new insights.\(^4\) The
process of discovery allows the receptors to use their own creativity and thinking rather
than relying solely on the marching orders of a messenger. This approach benefits all
involved in the communication process, for "it is in this process of discovery that the


\(^4\) Kraft, *Christianity in Culture*, 150.
deepest, most abiding kind of learning takes place."

The principle of unpredictability

An effective communicator will present a message which builds upon the existing beliefs of the receptor. Proceeding from the known to the unknown is, according to Smith, "a principle that is considered basic to sound pedagogy." At the same time, a communicator must keep in mind that a highly predictable message holds less interest and carries less impact than a message which, though understood, still manages to surprise the receptor with its uniqueness. Ironically, when a communicator fails to conform to the receptor’s stereotype, the receptor begins to take more careful note of the message.

This principle can be carried to an extreme, however. If a message conforms totally to a receptor’s expectations, impact is lost; but, if a message is entirely foreign to the receptor’s expectations and beliefs, it may be rejected. This rejection can occur even before the message is truly understood.

The principle of emotive language and story

The communicator who wishes to shape attitudes and values must understand and

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1Ibid., 163.
2Kraft, Communication Theory, 86.
3D. Smith, 85, 74.
4Kraft, Christianity in Culture, 160.
5Repeated television programming is one obvious example of this. A "rerun" loses viewers because the story is now predictable and, thus, has lost its potential impact.
6D. Smith, 265.
effectively employ emotive language. Such emotive language can even be considered “indispensable” if one wishes “to move an audience to accept a point of view or undertake an action.” Some well-meaning communicators may try to avoid emotive language for fear that an emotional appeal may be considered manipulation. Others may have been taught that appeals to the head were somehow of a higher order than appeals to the heart.

In his classic work, *Freedom in the Modern World*, philosopher John Macmurry addresses this “bias in favour of the intellect” and argues that “a merely intellectual force is powerless against an emotional resistance. . . . Unless the emotions and the intellect are in harmony, rational action will be paralysed.” According to Macmurry, “What we feel and how we feel is far more important than what we think and how we think. Feeling is the stuff of which our consciousness is made, the atmosphere in which all our thinking and all our conduct is bathed. All the motives which govern and drive our lives are emotional.”

Clearly, if a message is to produce deep and lasting change, it must have an emotional impact. It must not consist of the merely abstract, theoretical, or propositional. If abstract terms are not clearly defined, they may be misinterpreted and “may also

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3 Ibid., 47.

4 Ibid., 146.
represent ideas that are so vague as to be meaningless."¹ This is not to suggest that
abstract terms cannot be used, but rather, that communicators should not “expect abstract
terms alone to carry the emotional content of your message.”² Instead, the effective
communicator must couple abstractions with more concrete, emotive forms of expression
such as narrative, metaphor, and analogy.³

These forms of expression do more than create emotion in listeners. Throughout
history, narrative, metaphor, and analogy have served as vehicles for expressing and
exploring truth.⁴ Although narrative theology⁵ may seem to be a recent movement, it is
really a rediscovery of what has always been the case. Bible writers did not pen
systematic theologies; they told stories.⁶ Approximately a century ago, William James
confessed, “I do believe that feeling is the deeper source of religion, and that philosophic
and theological formulas are secondary products, like translations of a text into another

¹Rottenburg, 152.
²Ibid., 151.
³Ibid., 150-154.
⁴Madeleine L’Engle, The Rock That Is Higher: Story as Truth (Wheaton, IL: H.
Shaw, 1993), 90, 103.
⁵A helpful overview of some key concepts in narrative theology is provided by
Stanley Hauerwas and L. Gregory Jones, eds., Why Narrative? (Grand Rapids, MI:
Eerdmans, 1989).
⁶According to L’Engle, “The Gospels are story, the Good Story, the story we are
called to share with humility and joy” (197).
tongue."¹ William Bausch writes, "It is story and all related art forms that touch us at our deepest levels and convince us of truth."²

The principle of indigenous narrative

Not just any story, metaphor, or analogy will do, however. Before a communicator tells a story, he or she must realize that every culture already has its own stories.³ As communicators learn these narratives, they may discover that their "new story" can be presented from the perspective of the receptor's existing stories. In fact, illustrations, analogies, and metaphors which arise from the receptor's own life context are especially powerful.⁴

One of the benefits of searching for and utilizing such indigenous illustrations is that the people of the culture "cherish that particular idea or concept or ceremony. . . . When you start talking about something new in reference to this cherished, familiar thing, you have an automatic interest."⁵

Close inspection reveals that the use of such illustrations is actually a synthesis of the communication principles presented thus far. The terminology is familiar to the


⁴R. Hughes, 280.

receptors and is presented within their frame of reference. The message is receptor oriented and, by building on concepts already present within the culture, the Christian communicator demonstrates an understanding of the receptor, thus maintaining (and even building) credibility and trust. An analogy inherently makes space for the receptor(s) to discover meaning. It is also specifically relevant to life as the receptor lives it, and carries emotive force. In short, it includes many of the elements of effective communication; for this reason indigenous narrative holds great power.

Characteristics of the American Audience

This chapter began by posing a question: Does the dominant evangelical gospel presentation communicate with clarity and impact to contemporary North Americans? In an attempt to begin to answer this question, I briefly reviewed some basic principles of effective communication. Specifically, I noted that Christian communicators must be receptor oriented in their communication attempts. In other words, an effective message must be constructed and delivered with the intended audience in mind. To cross the selective filters of the intended audience and communicate with impact, the communicator must be acquainted with the audience. This means that an understanding of the contemporary American audience is necessary before the characteristics of the evangelical gospel presentation can be critiqued from the perspective of communication theory.

The Modern/Postmodern Assumption

At the outset, it may seem that an understanding of the American audience would not be difficult to achieve. J. Hector St. John Crevecoeur (1735-1813), a French
immigrant who was probably the first to attempt a description of Americans, noted that there existed a variety of regional American characters. Still, Crevecoeur argued that the American culture and people did exhibit an exceptional national character. In other words, in spite of diversity of race, ethnicity, language, and gender, Americans shared a national identity which was different from their old-world cultures. Crevecoeur's work was followed by other notable social commentators such as Alexis de Tocqueville (1805-1859), Frederick Jackson Turner (1861-1932), and Erich Fromm (1900-1980). These key figures have been joined by a host of others from a variety of disciplines, each with a specific interpretation of the American character.¹

In recent years, this interest in North American culture has waxed rather than waned. An attempt to describe the North American audience is challenged, not by the dearth of resources, but rather by the sheer volume and variety of studies on the subject. From this multitude of voices, all purportedly describing American culture, a certain assumption has begun to be accepted as fact.

This widely held view is that North America, along with the rest of Western society, is in the midst of a traumatic and fundamental change.² Diogenes Allen,

¹See Rupert Wilkinson, ed., American Social Character: Modern Interpretations from the '40s to the Present (New York: IconEditions, 1992), 2-12, for a helpful survey of some the main works in this area.

²A sampling of others who see this as a time of cultural transition in North America includes Eddie Gibbs, Church Next (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000), 27; Gene Edward Veith Jr., Postmodern Times: A Christian Guide to Contemporary Thought and Culture, Turning Point Christian Worldview Series (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1994), xi; Jimmy Long, Generating Hope: A Strategy for Reaching the Postmodern Generation (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1997), 68; Thomas C. Oden, Two Worlds: Notes on the Death of Modernity in America and Russia (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1992), 33, 40, 41; Middleton and Walsh, 10-11; Rick Richardson,
Professor of Philosophy at Princeton Theological Seminary, describes this as "a massive intellectual revolution . . . that is perhaps as great as that which marked off the modern world from the middle ages." According to Steven Best and Douglas Kellner, "We are currently undergoing a major paradigm shift within the culture at large, parallel to the shift from premodern to modern societies and from medieval to modern theory." In most cases, this period of transition is referred to as a change from a modern to a postmodern worldview. In order to understand the nature of this apparent transition, it is helpful to look at how modernity and postmodernity are described.

Modernity

According to Thomas Oden, modernity can be precisely dated as a historical epoch which began in the West in 1789 with the French Revolution and ended in 1989 with the fall of the Berlin Wall. Western society during this time was far from uniform, yet, at the risk of oversimplification, there developed a worldview which shared a number

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1Allen, 2.


3Worldview is used here, not as it would be strictly defined in anthropology, but to suggest the basic mind-set of people within a culture. This would include their foundational structure of thought and views of reality as well as beliefs, values, fears, aspirations, and perceived needs.

4Oden, Two Worlds, 32. Zustiak agrees on the time frame (133).
of central features. Drawing from Renaissance and Enlightenment ideals, the dominant features of modernity are as follows.¹

1. Humanism: Modernity elevated humans to center stage, as the highest reality and the highest value. All else existed for the service and benefit of humans. Humans were viewed as autonomous individuals, capable of rational thought and objective observation. They could know with certainty and objectivity. As the final measure and arbiter of truth, the human individual was not subject to any external authority. All such outside authorities were subjected to the scrutiny of human reason.

2. Naturalism: What is real is that which could be observed in nature. Nature was believed to operate with unchanging, universal principles or laws. Yet, although nature was predictable, it was also a dynamic force, able to produce changing life forms through an evolutionary process without the intervention of a supernatural, outside agent.²

3. Knowledge and Truth: Knowledge was viewed as good and could be gained through the careful observation of and experimentation with nature. Such study would uncover the laws of the universe. Eventually, this scientific method of arriving at knowledge came to be viewed as the best and only way. The path to knowledge and truth, then, was limited to the physical sciences. In the face of this reductionism, other

¹This list is based largely on Erickson’s summary of modernity in *Postmodernizing the Faith*, 16-17. Summaries such as this are common in literature dealing with contemporary North American culture. See, for example, Grenz, 57-81; Thomas Oden, *After Modernity, What?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992), 50-51; Long, 69; Rick Richardson, 43-45; and Zustiak, 132. Although no list is exactly identical, Erickson’s is representative.

²See Erickson, *Postmodernizing the Faith*, 17-18, on “hard modernity” vs. “soft modernity.”
disciplines were seen, not as complementary to science, but as subservient to it. Any truth claim was proved or disproved by scientific empiricism, the supposed “objective” and thereby “best” discipline.

4. Progress: The previously noted features of modernity led to a great optimism for the future. Humans, with their rational minds, would be able to objectively observe nature, discover its laws, and thus subdue or direct it for the benefit of humanity. While not all human problems would be solved immediately, progress was inevitable. Rational humans would be able to construct an ever better future for themselves. This “progress myth” permeated the American school system through the influence of John Dewey, and “describes the essential contours of the cultural imagination and spiritual driving force of the West.”

Postmodernity

In recent years, modern assumptions about the nature of reality have come under increasing attack, so much so that modernity is said to be dying. Its place is said to be taken by postmodernity, a term which is itself open to debate. Some avoid the labels

1Grenz, 3.
2Middleton and Walsh, 14.
3Ibid., 19.
4Oden, Two Worlds, 40. Grenz takes this for granted, saying, “As modernity dies around us, we appear to be entering a new epoch–postmodernity” (11).

5Most authors, even as they employ the terms “modernity” and “postmodernity,” acknowledge the difficulty in providing a precise definition. See, for example, Best and Kellner, 254; Ronald J. Allen, Barbara Shires Blaisdell, and Scott Black Johnston, Theology for Preaching: Authority, Truth, and Knowledge of God in a Postmodern Ethos (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997), 9; Gibbs, 23; and Sire, 174. In addition, see Rose for a
modern and postmodern and argue instead that North American culture is merely
experiencing what Harold Brown calls the “sensate” phase of civilization, the final stage
of a cycle which all cultures eventually pass through.\textsuperscript{1} Others describe Western culture as
exhibiting characteristics of later-stage or decadent modernity.\textsuperscript{2} Most social
commentators, however, admit that postmodern is the most widely used general
descriptor of Western civilization at the turn of the millennium.\textsuperscript{3}

While the exact contours of this mind-set are still emerging,\textsuperscript{4} and while some
agree that postmodernity should not be viewed as a cohesive, unified worldview,\textsuperscript{5} some
general agreement exists as to the basic contours of the postmodern mind in North
America. These postmodern themes are perhaps best understood as a reaction to the
detailed exploration of the history of the term “postmodern.” I would favor the
definition provided by Oden, who argues that “postmodernity . . .  is nothing more or less
complicated than \textit{what follows modernity}.” \textit{Two Worlds}, 44. Emphasis original.

\textsuperscript{1}Harold O. J. Brown, borrowing heavily from Pitirim A. Sorokin, makes this
argument in \textit{The Sensate Culture} (Dallas, TX: Word, 1996).

\textsuperscript{2}Oden uses the term “later-stage modernity” in \textit{After Modernity}, 50, and “decadent
While John Thornhill admits that “Western culture is now facing a crisis of self-
confidence,” he is not ready to say it is no longer modern. \textit{Modernity: Christianity’s

\textsuperscript{3}The tendency to accept this term, with all its difficulties, is illustrated by Sire,
who believes Western culture is experiencing the “most recent phase of the modern”
(189). Sire later devotes an entire chapter to describing postmodernism. He sees the
transition as so revolutionary that “a near future of cultural anarchy seems inevitable”
(174). So, while Sire believes the West is experiencing a phase of modernity, he also
employs the term “postmodernism.”

\textsuperscript{4}Best and Kellner, 254; Allen, Blaisdell, and Johnston, 10. According to Oden,
“the transition may last many decades.” \textit{Two Worlds}, 41.

\textsuperscript{5}Veith, 19; Grenz, 40.
fundamental premises of modernity.¹ Erikson traces seven related themes:

1. The objectivity of knowledge is denied. Whether the knower is conditioned by the particularities of his or her situation or theories are used oppressively, knowledge is not a neutral means of discovery.
2. Knowledge is uncertain. Foundationalism, the idea that knowledge can be erected on some sort of bedrock of indubitable first principles, has had to be abandoned.
3. All inclusive systems of explanation, whether metaphysical or historical, are impossible, and the attempt to construct them should be abandoned.
4. The inherent goodness of knowledge is also questioned. The belief that by means of discovering the truths of nature it could be controlled and evil and ills overcome has been disproved by the destructive ends to which knowledge has been put (warfare, for instance).
5. Thus, progress is rejected. The history of the twentieth century should make this clear.
6. The model of the isolated individual knower as the ideal has been replaced by community-based knowledge. Truth is defined by and for the community, and all knowledge occurs within some community.
7. The scientific method as the epitomization of the objective method of inquiry is called into question. Truth is not known simply through reason, but through other channels, such as intuition.²

Such broad, sweeping statements³ are characteristic of many writers on North American culture and character. But such lists, detailing the major tenets of the supposed postmodern American society, may actually present inaccurate portrayals on the basis of problematic assumptions.

¹Timothy R. Phillips and Dennis L. Okholm, eds., “Introduction,” in Christian Apologetics in a Postmodern World (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1995), 12; Rose, 171-175. According to Grenz, “Postmodernism represents a rejection of the Enlightenment project and the foundational assumptions upon which it was built” (5).

²Erikson, Postmodernizing the Faith, 18-19. As noted previously, lists such as these are common in literature on North American culture. I selected Erikson’s list because it is representative and in basic agreement with what many others have written. For other summaries of postmodernism, see Middleton and Walsh, 31-38; Gibbs, 23-24; Zustiak, 137-138; Sire, 173-189; and Veith, 158-159.

³In Erikson’s case, made without any citations.
Problems with the Modern/Postmodern Assumption

A number of problems surface in the literature which attempts to describe the basic mind-set of contemporary Americans. These problems are recognized by Rupert Wilkinson, who is himself a noted social commentator, in *American Social Character: Modern Interpretations from the '40s to the Present*, an anthology with contributions from "seventeen important analysts of American (United States) character and culture." Wilkinson, as the editor of the volume, delineates a number of these problems.

First, a writer’s academic training, political ideology, and source of funding all affect their "findings" on American character. For example, Wilkinson suggests that anticommunism and the Cold War had what he calls "a secondary influence on American character writing."

Second, there is a tendency to "overgeneralize from middle-class groups, especially from the young and trendy." Even when it is explicitly stated that the study is based on the middle class, the suggestion that the views and lifestyles of young, educated Americans from key urban centers will somehow spread to the rest of the population seems implicit.

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3Ibid., 6.

4Ibid., 13.

5Ibid.
Third, there has been little study on the differences between the social character of American males and females. As could be expected, there is, therefore, the tendency to generalize based on male character.¹

Fourth, Wilkinson warns of inferences regarding American character by authors who wish “to find a zeitgeist in every economic policy or political development.”²

Finally, Wilkinson notes what I believe to be the biggest mistake made by many authors and so-called “experts” on American culture: they seldom rely upon actual survey data of American people. It is not surprising, then, that “exaggerations can easily occur in literature that by and large does not rely on survey data, either from interviews or from questionnaires.”³

Wilkinson concludes: “These defects do not invalidate the literature on American character; they merely tell us how to view the literature, as a source of ideas and hypotheses rather than hard fact. . . . Taken as a whole, modern writing on American character should be regarded as something between social science and social fiction. It proves nothing conclusively; it illuminates much.”⁴

An attempt to understand the North American audience for the gospel presentation should not take “the experts” for granted, then. Oden, Erikson, Grenz, Veith, Best, and Kellner, for example, are illuminating, but their descriptions of the culture of North American should be recognized for what Wilkinson says it is:

¹Ibid.
²Ibid.
³Ibid.
⁴Ibid., 14.
"something between social science and social fiction."

Does the average American match the description of the postmodern view and "renounce closed structure, fixed meaning, and rigid order" in favor of "contingency and chaos"? Do Americans in general hold the view that "all institutions, all human relationships, all moral values, and all human creations—from works of art to religious ideologies—are all expressions and masks of the primal will to power"? In short, do the stated features of postmodernity accurately describe the mind-set of most Americans?

Certainly the term postmodern can be helpful if it highlights the fact that Western culture is changing. Unfortunately, naming this time of transition leads one to attempt to define, and it is this definition of the supposed postmodern American mind which can mislead rather than guide in an understanding of popular culture.

Ronald Potter speaks to this issue when he warns evangelicals to be mindful of the three publics to which they speak, "the public of the church, the public of the marketplace, and the public of the academy." Some Christian thinkers, Potter argues, tend to focus on a single public, the public of the academy, which would include what he calls "the modern and postmodern cultured despisers of the faith." This tendency can be illustrated in Stanley Grenz's Primer on Postmodernism.

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1Best and Kellner, 256.
2Veith, 158.
4Potter, 179.
Grenz intends his book specifically for "students, church leaders, youth workers and even colleagues," yet much of his book is an exploration of the "three major postmodern gurus," Richard Rorty, Jacques Derrida, and Michel Foucault. This would suggest that an understanding of these gurus will help one understand Americans in general.

Potter, however, would disagree. Far from being a postmodern society, he argues that "most Americans still basically affirm a traditional theism." Others agree that postmodernism is losing ground in North America. For example, Charles Colson argues that following the terrorist attacks in New York on September 11, 2001, Americans have begun to recognize what he calls "the flimsiness of postmodernism's presuppositions." Colson warns Christians: "It would be the supreme irony--and a terrible tragedy--if we found ourselves slipping into postmodernity just when the broader culture has figured out it's a dead end."

While a debate along these lines is probably not helpful for the Christian communicator who wishes to understand the average American, it is important for Christian communicators to realize that what the experts have told them about Americans may or may not be entirely true. For more accurate information on American views, one should not listen first to Jacques Derrida's deconstruction, but rather, to Americans themselves. It is from what the people say about themselves, a neglected source, that the

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1Grenz, ix.
2Ibid., xi.
3Potter, 180.
best picture of the North American audience emerges.

At the same time, evangelicals should keep in mind that there is no person who, strictly speaking, is an “average” American, so any attempt at describing Americans, even if it is based on survey sources, still requires a host of generalizations. Also, as noted previously, descriptions of American character vary widely depending on the background of the social commentator.

From a communications perspective, however, a critique of the ten characteristics of the gospel presentation must consider these survey data. This is the task for my next chapter.

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2 This is a step that Weiss, for example, is unwilling to take. Instead, Weiss suggests that America should be viewed, “not as fifty states but rather forty neighborhood types, each with distinct boundaries, values, consuming habits and political beliefs.” These forty neighborhood types, or “lifestyle clusters,” were developed by bringing together consumer surveys and census information and matching them to postal service zip codes. Weiss, *The Clustering*, xii.

CHAPTER 5

THE TEN CHARACTERISTICS AND THE AMERICAN AUDIENCE: COMMUNICATION OR CONFUSION?

In chapter 4, I reviewed the status of evangelistic communication in America. Next, I presented key concepts drawn from basic communication theory and noted the importance of receptor-sensitive communication. I then argued that North Americans have been analyzed largely by social scientists who have not relied upon actual survey data from Americans themselves.

The purpose of this chapter is to provide a critique of the ten characteristics of the gospel presentation from a communications perspective. Essentially, I address the question of whether or not the dominant gospel presentation communicates with clarity and impact.

I move through this critique in three major stages. First, I introduce the survey sources which serve as the foundation for an analysis of American views and beliefs. Second, I draw from these sources a general description of Americans, highlighting the current confusion about the nature of truth and then describing four key American values that evangelicals must be mindful of as they attempt to share the gospel. Third, the ten characteristics of the dominant evangelical gospel presentation are evaluated in light of...
communication theory and specific survey data coming from the contemporary American audience.

Prominent Survey Sources

In my study, I made use of a number of surveys. There were five studies, however, which I found especially helpful. Each of these sources is introduced below.

World Values Survey

The World Values Survey grew out of the work of the European Values Systems Study Group (EVSSG), which conducted a series of surveys in ten western European societies in 1981. The results sparked so much interest that the study was later expanded to include fourteen additional nations. In 1990-1993, these earlier studies were followed up with a more comprehensive World Values Survey which sought to uncover the beliefs, values, and activities of forty-three societies from around the globe, including the United States. Together, these forty-three societies (and the more than 60,000 respondents who took the World Values Survey) represented nearly 70 percent of the world’s population.

In 1998, the findings from this World Values Survey were first published in a

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1There are other survey sources cited beyond these five. Two additional sources were especially helpful: Robert N. Bellah and others, Habits of the Heart (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1985); and Milton Rokeach, The Nature of Human Values (New York: Free, 1973).


3Ibid., 467.

4Ibid., 15.

5Ibid., 1.
sourcebook entitled *Human Values and Beliefs*. This volume permits a quick analysis and comparison of the belief systems of societies from all around the globe. It provides a helpful foundational perspective on North American society and reveals some unique features of the North American mind-set.

**Gallup Polls**

A second major source of survey data on North American society is provided by the Gallup Organization, a management consulting firm which conducts surveys in a variety of countries in an attempt to measure human behaviors and attitudes. The Gallup Organization is perhaps best known in the United States for conducting The Gallup Poll, which has provided frequent measurements of public opinion on contemporary issues in North American society since the 1930s. While Gallup Poll results are reported regularly in a wide variety of publications, Gallup also records survey findings each year in a comprehensive annual sourcebook. These sourcebooks, along with a 1998 publication on American religious beliefs and attitudes, proved especially applicable to this dissertation.

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A third and perhaps key source of survey data comes from the Barna Research Group, founded in 1984 by George Barna in a spare bedroom of his home. Although Barna has conducted research for organizations such as Disney, Visa, First Interstate, and the United States Army, the specific goal of Barna Research Group is “to provide current, accurate and practical marketing information in manageable pieces to Christian ministries so that they may make more timely and intelligent decisions for ministry.” Barna’s research is especially helpful because of his focus on religious attitudes and behaviors in North America. Barna disseminates his research findings through books, newsletters, audio and video tapes, and frequent seminars across the United States. The best source of current information, however, is Barna’s website, which provides bi-weekly updates on research findings, as well as free access to archived research results from the past.

Patterson and Kim

In 1991, two advertising and consumer behavior specialists, James Patterson and Peter Kim, led a research team that conducted in-depth personal interviews with over 2,000 Americans in fifty different locations over a one-week period. Patterson and Kim’s research

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1George Barna has written a host of books, but his most recent findings (as well as archived results from the past) can be accessed at his website, “Barna Research Online,” 22 December 2003. http://www.barna.org/cgi-bin/home.asp (23 December 2003).


3“Barna Research Online.”

team promised total anonymity and complete privacy to respondents, thus obtaining information that respondents might have been hesitant to share if polled on the same subject by telephone. From Patterson and Kim's perspective, "This is the most massive in-depth survey of what Americans really believe that has ever been conducted."1 Patterson and Kim published their findings in *The Day America Told the Truth*.

Alan Wolfe2

Another helpful study, The Middle-Class Morality Project, was conducted in 1998 by Alan Wolfe and followed an interview strategy similar to that of Patterson and Kim. Together with research assistant Maria Poarch, Wolfe interviewed 25 individuals in eight different communities (for a total sample size of 200) in an attempt to discover the moral perspective of suburban Americans. Wolfe designed the format to encourage people to respond freely, but at the conclusion of the interview, he also asked that they fill out a short, 23-item questionnaire.3 Wolfe presents his findings in the book *One Nation after All*, which is his attempt to "draw a picture of middle-class morality at century's end."4

The American Audience

Moral Truth

As noted previously, much has been written about the changes taking place in American culture. Of particular interest to this study is the American view of absolute

1Ibid., 4.


3For a description of survey methods and locations, see ibid., 1-38.

4Ibid., 31.
truth and universal standards of morality. According to David Wells, American society has lost its way to such a degree that "we have become morally vacant"\(^1\) and "are traveling blind, stripped of our moral compass."\(^2\) Oden suggests that one of the characteristics of North American society is "absolutized moral relativism."\(^3\) The survey data, however, present a more complicated picture of American views of the nature of truth and morality.

The World Values Survey presented Americans with two different statements about moral values and asked which one most closely expressed their own view. Fifty percent chose the statement, "There are absolutely clear guidelines about what is good and evil. These always apply to everyone, whatever the circumstances." The second statement, "There can never be absolutely clear guidelines about what is good and evil. What is good and evil depends entirely upon the circumstances at the time," was selected by the remaining 50 percent. Thus, Americans were evenly split; when compared with the other forty-two societies in the survey, they expressed greater confidence in absolute distinctions between good and evil than the average of the other forty-two societies (50 percent to 31 percent).\(^4\) The fact that 50 percent affirmed their belief in "absolutely clear guidelines about what is good and evil" that "always apply to everyone, whatever the

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\(^2\)Ibid., 17.

\(^3\)Oden, *After Modernity*, 50.

\(^4\)Inglehart, Basañez, and Moreno, V 142. This volume begins and concludes with regular pagination. However, there are several hundred pages of graphs and reference tables at the center of the book. In this center section, the graphs and reference tables are numbered, but the pages are not.
circumstances” is especially surprising when compared with culturally similar Canada, where only 31 percent agreed, and Britain, where 36 percent agreed. In fact, of the forty-three societies studied, only three expressed a greater confidence in absolute standards than Americans.1

One might assume that research through the 1990s would show Americans drifting toward a more relativistic stance. Gallup, however, while noting “prevalent postmodernism in today’s world,” paradoxically goes on to affirm that “over eight in ten adults in this country (83%) endorse absolute guidelines in determining good and evil in all situations.”2 Rather than declining over the past decade, the number of Americans who affirm absolute guidelines for all situations increased between 1988 and 1998.3

George Barna is especially interested in this area and, based on his research, provides an in-depth analysis of American perspectives on truth. He summarizes his survey results in this way: “When we asked people if there are any moral absolutes that are unchanging or if moral and ethical choices depend on circumstances and personal preferences, confusion emerged. One-third said they believe moral truth is absolute and unchanging. Slightly fewer said moral truth depends on the individual and his/her circumstances. The remaining one-third admitted that they had no idea.”4

Dissatisfied with this analysis, Barna questioned more closely:

Probing further, we found that one-quarter of the people who believe absolute

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1Ibid. In Denmark, only 10 percent agreed.
2Gallup and Lindsay, 116.
3Ibid. The increase was from 83 percent to 87 percent.
4George Barna and Mark Hatch, Boiling Point (Ventura, CA: Regal, 2001), 193.
moral truth exists admitted that they could be persuaded otherwise. Likewise, two-thirds of those who said they believe truth is relative let on that they, too, could be persuaded otherwise. Where does that leave us? One-quarter of the population firmly believe that absolute moral truth exists. One out of 10 adults is convinced truth is relative. One out of 20 leans toward believing truth is absolute, 1 out of 10 leans toward believing truth is absolute. The remaining half of the population has no real stand on one of the pivotal perspectives for life.¹

These statistics on the general American population hide the fact that Americans who are not “born again”² are more likely to be relativists. More than one third (35 percent) agreed that “whatever is right for your life or works for you is the only truth you can know.”³ On a different survey question, their uncertainty regarding moral truth is better revealed. Seventeen percent expressed certainty that moral truth is absolute, with another 6 percent saying this was probably the case. Twelve percent were certain moral truth was relative, and 11 percent believed this was probably the case. The majority of those not “born again” (54 percent) were “not sure what to think about moral truth.”⁴

Clearly, though, the question of truth remains just that—a question—in the minds of many (or, even most) Americans. Very few have strong views one way or another, a few have leanings, and the largest segment of all do not know what they believe in this area.

Patterson and Kim’s interviews reveal the pressure this uncertainty places on many Americans. A majority “said they—and nobody else—determine what is and what

¹Ibid., 194-195. The seemingly inconsistent results of the World Values Survey, Gallup, and Barna probably arise from the fact that Americans are confused about what they believe in this area.

²See p. 124 of this dissertation for a complete definition of this term.

³Barna and Hatch, 191.

⁴Ibid., 8.
isn't moral in their lives. They base their decisions on their own experience." Yet, these same respondents were not comfortable in their self-assigned positions as arbiters of moral truth. Patterson and Kim noted that "in interview after interview, we saw men and women grappling with the consequences of their new freedom to define their own moral codes."

A sampling of quotes taken from actual interviews reveals this loss of a moral compass. A married businesswoman confessed, "I had sex with a stranger. Very good sex, too. I changed my name to hide my real identity from him. I don't know what's really right or wrong in this age." A female store manager, also married, admitted "driving my car under the influence of drugs and alcohol. Also, sex with a stranger in a motel in St. Petersburg. I guess they were both wrong things to do. I'm not sure." The vice president of a service company said, "I rationalize stealing from my company because they have screwed me royally. They took thousands from me. I took thousands from them. Who's to say who's right or wrong? Not them, that's for sure."

Patterson and Kim conclude, "When you are making up your own rules, your own moral codes, it can make the world a confusing place. Most Americans are very confused about their personal morals right now."

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1Patterson and Kim, 27.
2Ibid., 31.
3Ibid., 33.
4Ibid.
5Ibid., 34.
6Ibid.
Four Key American Values

Alan Wolfe’s Middle-Class Morality Project was helpful in coming to understand how American views on morality are closely related to a cluster of four other key American values.

First, Americans believe that people are basically good.1 Barna’s research verifies this American optimism regarding human nature. More than four in five (83 percent) of all adults agree with the statement, “People are basically good.” Among non-Christians, the figure jumps to 87 percent.2

This presupposition leads to a second belief: Since people are good, they should be granted almost unbridled freedom, for “free people will always choose to exercise their freedom in reasonable ways.”3 This American belief in the importance of freedom has long been recognized. In 1968, Milton Rokeach’s survey of American values revealed that “freedom” was ranked as one of the top three terminal values by both males and females.4 Approximately ten years later, Bellah concluded his extensive research by suggesting that freedom is generally understood as being able to do what one wants without any external constraints or pressure to conform, and that this “freedom is perhaps the most resonant, deeply held American value.”5 Nearly a decade later, the World Values

1Wolfe, 85.

2George Barna, What Americans Believe (Ventura, CA: Regal, 1991), 89. One might suspect that such optimism would carry over to Americans’ view of society in general, but this is not the case, as will be discussed later.

3Wolfe, 272.


5Bellah and others, 23.
Survey again affirmed that Americans continue to place great value on personal freedom to live and develop without hindrance. Finally, Wolfe's 1998 study demonstrates that "freedom" remains a central value for Americans at the close of the twentieth century. Americans may affirm the existence of God, yet, as Wolfe describes it, they "put their faith in people, . . . for good people will always make the right kinds of choices."

A third key belief for middle-class Americans is that moderation should be exercised in all areas of life. By moderation, Wolfe means a "distrust of extremes, even those views they consider correct but that are asserted with too much finality." Even though religion is viewed positively by an overwhelming majority of Americans, 80 percent still believe that a person can be "too religious." Even positive virtues, then, should be practiced in moderation.

Wolfe argues that tolerance is a fourth key value for middle-class Americans. In

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The World Values Survey questioned Americans about the importance of "equality" and "freedom" with this question: "I find that both freedom and equality are important. But if I were to choose one or the other, I would consider personal freedom more important, that is, everyone can live in freedom and develop without hindrance." More than seven out of ten Americans (71 percent) agreed that this "personal freedom" was more important than equality. This was much higher than the global average of 54 percent who agreed with this statement. Inglehart, Basáñez, and Moreno, V247.

Wolfe, 85. Wolfe writes, "Faced with a choice between submission to a power outside (and greater than) themselves and a focus on their own particular needs, American individualism guarantees that the former will rarely triumph over the latter" (82).

Ibid., 72.

Ibid., 56. Wolfe notes the popularity of Colin Powell within the Republican Party and suggests that this may come from the fact that Powell "symbolizes moderation in everything he does or says" (59).

Five percent had no opinion, and only 15 percent disagreed. Ibid., 83.

Ibid., 72.
fact, Americans may value tolerance even more than moderation.\(^1\) Wolfe suggests that Americans have an Eleventh Commandment: Thou shalt not judge.\(^2\) This tolerance applies to all areas of life, including religion. One’s beliefs are a personal matter and the expectation is that “you can do what you want so long as you let me do what I want.”\(^3\) The attitude is illustrated by Brian, who was a part of Bellah’s research. Brian explained, “If you want to go in your house and smoke marijuana and shoot dope and get all screwed up, that’s your business, but don’t bring that out on the street, don’t expose my children to it, just do your thing. That works out kind of neat.”\(^4\) This related cluster of beliefs—in the basic “goodness” of humans, the importance of individual freedom, and the value placed on the principles of moderation and tolerance—provides a general foundation for an understanding of the contemporary American mind-set.

**The Ten Characteristics and the American Audience**

While this general description is important, a critique of the ten characteristics of the evangelical gospel presentation in light of communication theory requires more specificity regarding the American audience. I will proceed, then, to review each of the

\(^1\)”Broadmindedness” ranked within the top five instrumental values of both males and females in Rokeach’s research. *The Nature*, 58.

\(^2\)Wolfe, 54.

\(^3\)Ibid., 63.

\(^4\)Bellah and others, 7.
ten characteristics of the evangelical gospel presentation in light of specifically relevant
findings on the American mind-set.¹

One: The Uniformity of the Message

In a certain sense, the uniformity of the dominant gospel presentations is a
characteristic well suited to the American environment. In many other nations of the
world, unique dialects, tribal identities, and clashing religious loyalties divide citizens
into a myriad of distinct cultures. Citizens of the United States, however, have managed
to maintain a sense of national identity in spite of their great diversity. So, compared
with the citizens of other large nations, Americans have indeed been remarkably united.²

After conducting extensive research among middle-class Americans, Wolfe noted that the
“culture war” does not exist to the extent that “distinguished sociologists” and
“intellectuals” have claimed.³ In fact, Wolfe concluded that “there is little truth to the
charge that middle-class Americans, divided by a culture war, have split into two hostile
camps.”⁴ Instead, the title of his book explicitly states Wolfe’s belief: although America
is diverse, it remains essentially One Nation after All.

Since this is the case, and since most Americans share a common culture and
similar values, a uniform gospel presentation, rightly targeted to this culture, could be

¹Some findings apply to more than one characteristic. In those cases, findings
may be restated for purposes of clarity.

²Crevecoeur’s initial assessment (see p. 94 of this dissertation) apparently remains
at least partly accurate.

³Wolfe, 16.

⁴Ibid., 321.
widely employed with some success. Over the last half of the twentieth century, this is precisely what has occurred. The basic gospel outline produced by Kennedy, Bright, and Graham was gradually accepted and taught by a variety of evangelicals at least partly because it proved to be effective with so many people.

The problem with a uniform presentation of the gospel, however, is that it glosses over the very real differences which exist between individuals. A uniform presentation ignores the personality, spiritual background, life stage, and needs of the receptor, and by failing to adjust the message accordingly, also fails to communicate as meaningfully as would otherwise be possible.¹

Americans may be a part of one nation, but they are not identical, after all. Since there are such differences, evangelicals should be wary of accepting a basic presentation of the gospel for use with everyone. Barna’s observation should be carefully heeded: “Our research revealed a cornerstone principle: there is no ‘right’ way to introduce other people to Christ.”² So, instead of the basic “one way” of Kennedy, Bright, and Graham, many other presentations can and should be used.

Two: The Resistance to Change

The dominant presentation of the good news was forged in the 1950s and 1960s. The decades since have been times of rapid change, both globally and nationally. Americans have changed.³

¹Baehr, 20; Engel, How Can I?, 35.
²Barna, Evangelism That Works, 77.
³For example, in the 1950s, 58 percent of women were virgins at the time of their marriage, 6 percent of the population were college graduates, and 9 percent of households...
In the introduction to his 1953 book, *Peace With God*, Billy Graham referred to the fact that Americans were living under the dreadful threat of the cobalt bomb. Since that time, the cobalt bomb has faded as a threat to the American way of life. In fact, few Americans know what a cobalt bomb is. Obviously, American fears, needs, and values have changed since Graham wrote *Peace With God*. However, the content of the book remains the basis for Graham’s gospel presentation entitled “Steps to Peace With God,” which is still used today.

As was the case with the characteristic of uniformity, the fact that the gospel presentation is relatively old means it does not exhibit specific sensitivity to the contemporary American audience. Although Bright believed the four spiritual laws to be “transferable,” in other words, “a truth that can be communicated . . . generation after generation, without distorting or diluting the original truth,” he was mistaken. While a truth can be transferred from generation to generation, it must be expressed in new ways to each generation. In other words, for a truth to remain consistent, its expression must change.

At about the same time Bright suggested that the four spiritual laws were transferrable from generation to generation, Alan Walker called for a different approach, namely, that every Christian must “make his gospel intelligible by the use of relevant, 

had a television set. In 1990, only 35 percent of first-time brides were virgins, 19 percent of Americans were college graduates, and 98 percent of households had at least one television set. Patterson and Kim, 3.

1Graham, *Peace With God*.

2Bright, *Come Help*, 77.
freshly minted expressions of truth." Communication theory suggests that Walker’s appeal must be heeded. So, while recognizing the tremendous value of these past presentations of the gospel, evangelicals must also recognize that expressions of truth, developed through ministry experiences of the 50s and 60s, should not be uncritically accepted half a century later.

From the perspective of communication theory, then, the gospel presentation should not be a formula that remains the same with the passage of time. Formulated with a specific generation in mind, it loses some of its clarity and impact with each subsequent generation of spiritual seekers. The more specifically relevant and focused a message is to the receptor, the greater the clarity and impact of that message.²

Three: The Focus on the Individual

The evangelical gospel presentation assumes as its audience an autonomous individual with the freedom to make a life-changing decision without the knowledge or approval of family, friends, or larger community. At first glance, this assumption of the autonomous, free individual resonates well with the American audience as demonstrated

1Alan Walker, *The Whole Gospel for the Whole World* (New York: Abingdon, 1957), 60. The tendency to uncritically accept past formulations of the gospel is further illustrated by Selwyn Hughes, who suggests that there are “five essentials that must be presented” to the one who wants to become a Christian, and then proceeds to refer back to essentials “used by the leaders of the great eighteenth century evangelical revival.” *The Introvert’s Guide to Spontaneous Witnessing* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany, 1983), 165. Similarly, when George Sweeting advises his readers on how to present the gospel, he refers to a booklet published for “nearly a century.” *How to Witness Successfully: A Guide for Christians to Share the Good News* (Chicago: Moody, 1978), 61. This same outline is still used by ATS in their tract, *4 Truths God Wants You to Know* (Garland, TX: American Tract Society, 1999).

²Hesselgrave, 138; Kraft, *Christianity in Culture*, 149; Ball-Rokeach, Rokeach, and Grube, 35; D. Smith, 19.
by the findings of Rokeach, Bellah, and Wolfe.¹

As research points out, Americans see themselves as self-sufficient² and base their moral decisions largely on their personal experience.³ Patterson and Kim discovered in their interviews that 93 percent of Americans “said they—and nobody else—determine what is and what isn’t moral in their lives.”⁴

The autonomous individualism and the value placed upon almost unbridled individual freedom also has a price, however. Bellah noted that Americans struggle “to forge bonds of attachment to, or cooperation with, other people, since such bonds would imply obligations that necessarily impinge on one’s freedom.”⁵ Freedom, as Americans define it, apparently leads to isolation and loneliness.

This lack of connection with others is vividly illustrated in the interviews conducted by Wolfe, and Patterson and Kim. More than seven out of ten (72 percent) of Americans “openly admit that they don’t know the people next door.”⁶ The researchers heard comments such as these: “I’ve been living eight years over here and I still don’t

¹In short, Americans view society primarily as a “collection of individuals” rather than a collection of groups. McElroy, 228.


³Patterson and Kim, 27.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Bellah and others, 6.

⁶Patterson and Kim, 172. Fifteen percent did not even know the names of their next-door neighbors.
know my neighbor," and "There’s absolutely no sense of community here whatsoever.
I’ve never found it anywhere.”

Based on comments such as these, Wolfe concludes that “America’s suburban communities do seem to be chilly places. Devoid of people during the day, they are filled with people sitting in front of television or computer screens in the evenings, too self-preoccupied to live a Tocquevillian life of civic engagement.”

Barna’s research indicates that approximately half (49 percent) of American non-Christians admit they are currently “trying to find a few good friends.” Barna concludes that Americans from the so-called Boomer and Buster generations are “relationally starved.” Patterson and Kim discovered that “nearly half the population honestly feel that nobody knows them.”

The price of American freedom, it appears, is loneliness. Paradoxically, then, the individualism of the evangelical gospel presentation both helps and hinders its communicational effectiveness. Americans are individualistic and desire self-sufficiency, yet they long for connections with others. They want autonomy, but crave community. Thus, the individualistic gospel presentation comes in a palatable form for Americans, but it fails to provide a solution to their hunger for community.

The frequent image in the gospel presentation of a lone sinner using the cross as a

1Wolfe, 251.

2Ibid.

3Barna Research Group, “Most People Seek Control.”


5Patterson and Kim, 39.
bridge to God reinforces the cultural value of individuality, but does not speak to the heart cry of isolated, lonely Americans. It approaches them as individuals, and leaves them as individuals. They must walk the path alone.

Four: The Assumption of Certain Audience Attitudes and Beliefs

Evangelism Explosion begins with a diagnostic question: “Do you know for sure that you are going to be with God in heaven?” The underlying assumption is that the respondent is familiar with Christianity but is not a Christian, holds an orthodox view of God, and believes that heaven is a place where some people go after death.

While such assumptions may have been relatively safe in past generations, they probably are no longer so. For example, are most Americans Christian? Do they believe in God, and if so, what kind of God do they believe in? What about heaven? A brief review of several key assumptions and terms demonstrates that past assumptions may not be present realities. In particular, I explore assumptions about Christianity in America and American beliefs about God, sin, Jesus, heaven, and church.

Christianity

The traditional evangelical gospel presentation supposes that there are Americans who are not converted. While there are certainly some Americans who have not entered into a personal relationship with Christ, the assumption is that most Americans are already Christian. On the surface, this would seem to be the case. Research conclusively demonstrates that America views itself as a Christian nation. Of the general population,

1Kennedy, “Do You Know?”
85 percent identify themselves as Christians and a mere 8 percent as agnostic/atheist.¹

Since this is the case, it would seem that the audience for the gospel presentation is quite small—a mere 15 percent of Americans do not consider themselves Christians. Barna, however, has demonstrated that many Americans who describe themselves as Christians have not been “born again.” Although the term “born again” is religious jargon probably not understood by most Americans, Barna uses the term to describe a specific group of Americans, namely: “People who said they have made a personal commitment to Jesus Christ that is still important in their life today and who also indicated they believe that when they die they will go to Heaven because they had confessed their sins and had accepted Jesus Christ as their savior. Respondents were not asked to describe themselves as ‘born again’ or if they considered themselves to be ‘born again.’”²

In 1991, 35 percent of Americans matched this definition and thus, according to Barna, were “born again.” By 2001, this percentage had climbed to 41 percent.³ This figure, seldom quoted or noted, is probably the best measure of the number of Christians in the United States. In this study, the terms “Christian” and “born again” are used synonymously. Conversely, “non-Christian” is sometimes used to describe those who are


not “born again,” even if they would define themselves as “Christian.”¹

This means, of course, that although 85 percent of the population consider themselves Christian, fewer than half have been “born again.” In a sense, then, the United States is not a Christian nation, but a country in which nearly 60 percent of the population have not committed themselves to Christ and do not trust in him for their salvation.

God

According to the World Values Survey, 96 percent of Americans believe in God.² Barna’s research suggests a similar percentage (95 percent),³ as do Gallup (95 percent)⁴ and Patterson and Kim (90 percent).⁵ This high degree of belief in God has been remarkably consistent since the 1950s.⁶

¹This usage is in harmony with the Barna Research Group. See “Annual Study Reveals,” where “Christian” is used as a synonym for “born again.” Recently, there has been much talk about the “unchurched” in North America as the target group for evangelism. In 2000, Barna suggested that 33 percent of Americans were unchurched (in other words, they have not attended church services for six months, excluding holidays and special events). The assumption that “unchurched” means “non-Christian” is not correct, however. Barna discovered that two out of three unchurched Americans consider themselves Christian, and approximately ten million unchurched Americans (11 percent) are born-again Christians. Barna Research Group, “Unchurched People,” 19 April 2001, http://www.barna.org/cgi-bin/PageCategory.asp?CategoryID=38 (23 December 2003).

²Inglehart, Basáñez, and Moreno, V166.


⁴Gallup and Lindsay, 23. Gallup’s figure of 95 percent includes those who believe in God or a “Higher Power.”

⁵Patterson and Kim, 199.

⁶Gallup and Lindsay, 23.
Evangelicals would be comforted to know that 68 percent of Americans agree that God is "the all-powerful, all-knowing, and perfect creator of the universe who still rules the world today."\textsuperscript{1} Even among non-Christian Americans, a majority respond affirmatively to this rather traditional description of God.\textsuperscript{2}

The American esteem for belief in God is vividly illustrated in a 1999 Gallup Poll conducted before the 2000 United States presidential election. Prospective voters were asked, "If your party nominated a generally well-qualified person for president who happened to be one of the following, would you vote for that person?" The traits listed included "Jewish," "Black," "Homosexual," "Woman," "Mormon," and "Atheist." With the exception of one trait, a majority responded that they would still vote for that person. The only trait which would not be accepted by a majority of Americans was "atheist." In other words, an individual could be a Jew, Black, homosexual, female, or Mormon, and most people in their political party would still vote for them. But if the candidate did not believe in God, fewer than half within their own political party would support them.\textsuperscript{3}

Clearly, belief in God is not only common, but it is desired and expected. Failure to believe in God invites more prejudice than one's race, gender, or sexual orientation.

While this apparent Christian theism may be heartening to evangelicals, there is cause for concern. Widespread belief in God as Creator obscures the variety of

\textsuperscript{1}Barna Research Group, "Beliefs: Theological."

\textsuperscript{2}Barna Research Group, "Unchurched People."

\textsuperscript{3}The Gallup Poll: 1999 (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 1999), 53. This would suggest that while there is certainly prejudice based on race, gender, and sexual orientation, Americans' strongest bias is directed against those who do not believe in God; i.e., it is a religious prejudice.
perceptions and definitions of God held by Americans. Approximately one out of ten Americans (11 percent) define “God” as a state of higher consciousness, and 7 percent view “God” as “the total realization of personal human potential.”¹ Four percent believe “everyone is God,” while 3 percent are polytheistic, believing that there are “many gods, each with different power and authority.”²

Thus, as previously noted, the vast majority of Americans (over 90 percent) believe in God, the communicator of the gospel must realize that fully one quarter of all Americans define God in one of these four unorthodox ways: God is a state of higher consciousness; God is the realization of human potential; all humans are gods; or there are many different gods.³ In fact, among those who are not “born again,” 73 percent believe that “Christians, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, and others all pray to the same God, even though they use different names for that God.”⁴

Sin

In the traditional gospel presentation, God is just and therefore must punish sin. As was just noted, Americans believe in God; most also believe in sin. In fact, in 1990, 89 percent of Americans said they “believed” in sin.⁵ Since that time, there appears to be

¹Barna Research Group, “Beliefs: Theological.”
²Barna Research Group, “Beliefs: General Religious.”
³Ibid.
⁴Barna, What Americans Believe, 212. Even among born-again Christians, a majority agree with this statement.
⁵Inglehart, Basáñez, and Moreno, V172. The global average was 62 percent.
an increase in the number of people who believe there is such a thing as sin.\(^1\) Even among non-Christian Americans, only 17 percent believe that “the whole idea of sin is outdated.”\(^2\)

Affirming the existence of sin is not the same as defining sin biblically, however. Patterson and Kim discovered that fewer than 40 percent of those interviewed defined sin as going contrary to God’s will, the Bible, or the Ten Commandments.\(^3\) They concluded, “Sin, as most of us see it today, is doing unto others what we don’t want done unto ourselves.”\(^4\)

Although the typical evangelical gospel message presents sin as the primary human problem, most Americans do not feel that this is true. According to Patterson and Kim, “a number of us simply do not feel guilt of shame at all these days.”\(^5\) In their private interviews, about three in four said they had done nothing in the past year that they knew was wrong and felt ashamed for. Among the remaining, one out of four who

\(^2\)Barna and Hatch, 194.
\(^3\)Patterson and Kim, 203.
\(^4\)Ibid., 202.
\(^5\)Ibid., 56. This lack of guilt or shame is interesting in light of the fact that 64 percent of those interviewed agreed that they would lie “so long as it doesn’t cause any real damage” and 74 percent said they would “steal from those who won’t really miss it.” Ibid., 25.
acknowledged having done something wrong, the most common “sins” involved sex, lying, stealing, and addictions.¹

Regardless of how sin is defined, more than one in three (35 percent) of Americans who are not “born again” believe “there are some crimes or sins people commit that God cannot forgive.”² For these Americans, the guilt of some sins, however it is defined, lasts forever in God’s eyes.

Jesus

For Kennedy, Bright, Graham, and evangelicals in general, a presentation of the plan of salvation centers on Jesus. Research reveals that Americans’ views of Jesus are similar to their beliefs about God: There seems to be basic agreement until one begins to probe a bit deeper. For example, more than eight out of ten Americans (84 percent) say they believe Jesus to be “God or the Son of God.”³ At the same time, about half (49 percent) of non-Christian Americans believe Jesus committed sins, and nearly the same number (48 percent) believe that “after his death, Jesus did not return to life physically.”⁴

¹Ibid., 56-57. The “sins” confessed to, listed in order from most to least common, were as follows: adultery/affair, fornication/premarital sex, lying, illegal drug use, stealing, cheating/taking advantage of others, drunkenness, abortion, shoplifting, wicked thoughts, verbal cruelty, masturbation, stealing from work, kinky sex, and pornography. These activities, Patterson and Kim suggest, are “arguably the truest indicator of America’s private morality” (57).

²Barna and Hatch, 193.

³Gallup and Lindsay, 123. The remaining 9 percent saw Jesus as a man who was a religious leader, 1 percent said Jesus was “just a story,” and 6 percent were unsure what to believe.

⁴Barna and Hatch, 191.
The Jesus of the evangelical gospel presentation is depicted as one who died as a perfect substitute sacrifice for our sin and then rose from the dead. It assumes that Americans know the story of Jesus' passion and accept it as fact. The purpose of the presentation is to communicate the salvific implications of this historical fact. This emphasis on Jesus as a perfect sacrifice who triumphed over death obviously fails to consider that about half of the target audience believe Jesus sinned and is now dead. With this prior belief, the logic of the presentation is lost: How does the son of God, who sinned, was killed, and is now dead, assure a seeker of a place in heaven?

**Heaven**

The evangelical gospel presentation portrays heaven as the ultimate reward for the one who accepts Jesus. Compared with the rest of the world, Americans express an above-average level of belief in heaven. More than seven out of ten (72 percent) say they believe in heaven, 20 percent are not sure, and the remaining 8 percent do not believe in heaven.

However, during the 1990s, American belief about how one attains heaven underwent a significant change. In 1992, 40 percent agreed that "all good people, whether or not they consider Jesus Christ to be their savior, will live in heaven after they die on earth." In 1994, 46 percent agreed with this statement. By 1999, the number

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1 Inglehart, Basáñez, and Moreno, V171. Eighty-seven percent of Americans' said they believed in heaven (the global average was 53 percent).

2 Gallup and Lindsay, 30.
expressing agreement rose to 53 percent, and only 40 percent disagreed. Among non-
Christians, there is an even higher level of belief (65 percent) that “if a person is generally
good or does enough good things for others, they will earn a place in heaven.”

The corollary of this belief relates to hell. Only 19 percent of non-Christian
Americans believe that “people who do not consciously accept Jesus Christ as their savior
will be condemned to hell.” A greater percentage (26 percent) believe that “after death,
some people are reincarnated in another life form.”

For most non-Christians, then, one’s eternal destiny is not tied to acceptance of
Jesus Christ as savior. Instead, people are “saved” or “lost” based on another criterion:
their goodness. Evidently, most Americans believe that if this is the basis of judgment,
they are good enough, because only 4 percent of Americans expect to end up in hell.
The gospel presentation assumes most people feel lost. The fact is, most Americans
believe there is a heaven and are quite confident that they will be there.

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.org/cgi-bin/PageCategory.asp?CategoryId=3 (15 June 2001).

2Barna and Hatch, 193. Thirty-one percent of born-again Americans agree with
this statement.

3Barna Research Group, “Beliefs: Salvation.”

4Barna and Hatch, 194. A 1994 Gallup Poll found that 27 percent of all
Americans claimed belief in reincarnation when it was defined as the “rebirth of the soul
in a new body after death.” This represented an increase from Gallup’s 1990 poll, where
only 21 percent of adults believed in reincarnation. Gallup and Lindsay, 32-33.

5Patterson and Kim, 204. Patterson and Kim note, “In this respect, we have not
lost the optimism for which we are famous.”
Church

Following the prayer of invitation, the typical presentation encourages the newly committed person to find and attend a local church. This well-meaning invitation to "church" is meant to facilitate Christian support and fellowship for the new believer.

The term "church," however, carries negative connotations for many Americans. Among non-Christians, 60 percent say having "a close personal relationship with God" is very desirable for their future, but only 37 percent say being "part of a local church" is very desirable.1 So, while a majority are positive about developing a relationship with God, most are not positive about becoming a part of a church. This distinction is illuminated by further research, which shows that 34 percent of non-Christians agree strongly that Christianity is relevant to life,2 but only 21 percent strongly agree that "the Christian churches in your area are relevant to the way you live today."3 Non-Christian Americans, then, seem to be most positive about developing a personal relationship with God, less certain of the relevance of Christianity, and even less likely to view the Christian church as relevant.

The reason for this may lie in that local churches are viewed by many as being intolerant of ideas not congruent with church teachings. Barna notes that "the perception

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1Barna, What Americans Believe, 169-170.
2Ibid., 184.
3Ibid., 187.
is not simply that churches reject different ideas, but that they reject the people who hold those ideas, as well.\textsuperscript{1}

With this in mind, it becomes clear why the suggestion to join a local church may carry negative connotations. In general, Americans have declining trust in all institutions, including the church. They view the local church as largely irrelevant and intolerant, a violation of what Wolfe calls America’s “Eleventh Commandment: Thou shalt not judge.”\textsuperscript{2} “What a horrifying thought it is,” Barna writes, “that the local church might actually inhibit people from coming to know the reality of God.”\textsuperscript{3}

These few examples of assumptions regarding audience views of God, sin, Jesus, heaven, and church are not meant to suggest that the traditional presentation of the gospel is somehow “wrong.” On the other hand, as communication theory alerts us, an accurate message can communicate poorly if the receptor of the message understands key terms differently from the sender. This is precisely what has occurred in American with the evangelical gospel presentation. The evangelical gospel presentation presents a just God who must punish sin, affirms that Jesus’ death opens the way for sinners to receive life and heaven, and encourages people to become part of the church. Yet the target audience for this message holds beliefs and assumptions that lessen the impact such a message might have. Sixty-five percent of American non-Christians believe human beings can

\textsuperscript{1}Ibid., 173.

\textsuperscript{2}Wolfe, 54.

\textsuperscript{3}Barna, \textit{What Americans Believe}, 299. Emphasis original.
earn their way to heaven,¹ and most think they are doing pretty well: only 4 percent of Americans expect to end up in hell. Approximately half of the intended audience believes Jesus sinned and is dead, and most do not believe the Christian church is relevant in today's world. In short, the traditional message assumes too much.

Five: The Promise of the Good Life

The evangelical gospel presentation clearly attempts to communicate good news. It promises that God “offers a wonderful plan for your life,,”² an “abundant life,”³ a “great adventure,”⁴ and the entrance into “peace and life—abundant and eternal.”⁵ This promise of a good life resonates well with most Americans, who, along with all people, desire a positive and happy future.

For at least two reasons, this promise is perhaps not as alluring as evangelicals would hope. First, the presentation assumes that most people sense a great lack in their lives and would be drawn to an abundant life both now and in the future. Research suggests, however, that Americans are quite satisfied with life already. Among non-Christians, more than seven out of ten say they are excited about the future, pleased with the present, and are “completely/mostly satisfied with life.”⁶ As was previously noted,

¹Barna and Hatch, 193.
²Bright, “Have You Heard?”
³Bright, “Now That You.”
⁴Ibid.
⁵Graham, “Steps to Peace.”
Americans are already extremely optimistic about their eternal destiny. Yet, the evangelical promise of “heaven” and “eternal life” are the most common assurances given, not only in the dominant gospel presentations, but in the literature of the American Tract Society.¹ The gospel presentation, then, promises something the vast majority of Americans believe they already have. The evangelical presentation begins, as it were, much like a lifeguard who offers a life-line to a person who believes she is already floating safely toward shore.

A second reason makes the evangelical promise of the good life less attractive than anticipated. Communication theory suggests that the more specifically relevant a message is, the greater its impact. As a message addresses the needs and goals of its audience, it increases in power. The promise of an abundant life fails to specifically address American desires for the future as well as areas of life where Americans have perceived needs. If it did so, Americans would be more receptive to the message that is given.

Barna attempted to find out what Americans desired for the future by presenting a list of twenty-one possible goals for the future. The ranking of these goals, along with the percentage who said the goal was “very desirable,” was as follows:

- having good physical health (91 percent)

(15 June 2001).

¹In 1968, Milton Rokeach’s survey of American adults asked them to rank their terminal values. Women ranked “salvation” in fourth position, but men ranked it in twelfth position, after values such as “a comfortable life,” “self-respect,” “a sense of accomplishment,” and “national security.” For the average American, then, the desire for salvation is not the primary motivator. This is especially true for American males. Rokeach, The Nature, 57.
living with a high degree of integrity (81 percent)
having one marriage partner for life (79 percent)
having close, personal friendships (75 percent)
having a clear purpose for living (75 percent)
having a close relationship with God (70 percent)
having a satisfying sex life with your marriage partner (63 percent)
having a comfortable lifestyle (61 percent)
living close to your family and relatives (60 percent)
having children (55 percent)
being deeply committed to the Christian faith (53 percent)
being knowledgeable about current events (50 percent)
making a difference in the world (47 percent)
being personally active in a church (42 percent)
having a college degree (41 percent)
influencing other people’s lives (37 percent)
working in a high-paying job (29 percent)
traveling throughout the world for pleasure (26 percent)
owning a large home (21 percent)
owning the latest household technology and electronic equipment (9 percent)
achieving fame or public recognition (6 percent)

Barna noted that the ranking of these goals has not changed much since the
beginning of the 1990s, with only three shifts worth noting: a decline in the value placed
on living near relatives (from 67 percent to 60 percent), a decline in interest in being part
of a local church (from 50 percent to 42 percent), and a decline in considering a high-
paying job as a “very desirable” priority for the future (from 36 percent to 29 percent).
Compared with Americans in 1991, Americans in 2000 have basically the same desires
for the future, except that they are less connected to their extended families, less positive
toward their local church, and less focused on gaining wealth.

While the ranking listed above is for the general adult population, there are few

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2Ibid.
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differences between Americans who call themselves “born again” and those who do not. Of those who identified themselves as “born again,” 68 percent said “having a clear purpose for living” was very desirable, and a majority (55 percent) said the same about “having a close, personal relationship with God.” Finally, while a clear purpose for living was seen as “very desirable” by nearly seven out of ten Americans who were not “born again,” 49 percent also agreed to the statement: “You are still trying to figure out the purpose and meaning of your life.”

This information provides a Christian communicator with insight into the hopes and dreams of the average non-Christian American. Rather than a broad promise of an “abundant life,” evangelicals would do well to be specific and address issues such as physical health, family life, and how a person can develop integrity, a clear purpose for living, and a close, personal relationship with God, all of these seen as “very desirable” by over half of those who have not been “born again.” These are just a few examples of how a better knowledge of the audience could increase the specificity and thus the impact of the gospel presentation in North America.

Finally, the typical promise of the good life in the gospel presentation also runs the real risk of promising too much. Barna warns that Christians have a tendency to “push salvation as a route to eternal comfort and pleasure.” Yet, one questions whether

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1Ibid.

2Barna and Hatch, 194.

3Barna, Evangelism That Works, 143.
a person who listens to the gospel presentation and prays the suggested prayer will begin immediately to enjoy an “abundant life.”

Robert Kolb correctly notes that evangelicals in America may have made Christianity into “some magic amulet for warding off whatever seems unpleasant in the world.”¹ Douglas John Hall is more pointed in his critique, asserting that “the basic thrust of Peale’s ‘modernism’ is the same as Graham’s ‘Biblicism’. It is to alleviate and remove the experience of negation.”² Hall looks to previous decades of modern industrial optimism and continues, “In that zeal for identification with the expectations of the most expectant epoch in the history of mankind, the dominant Christianity of the West—especially in North America—became a stranger to the age-old experiences of mankind: the experiences of guilt and judgment; of tragedy, chaos, failure; of despair and death; of the whole range of negation. It is still so . . . North American Christians still insist on being strangers to the night.³

Hall believes this type of Christianity “is nothing more nor less than the official religion of the officially optimistic society.”⁴ The glib promise that when one accepts Jesus, everything is wonderful ignores the very real problems that Americans face.

While Americans are optimistic about their lives and their eternal future, when pressed,

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¹Robert Kolb, Speaking the Gospel Today: A Theology for Evangelism (St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 1984), 78.


³Ibid., 111.

⁴Ibid., 74.
they will acknowledge that all is not well. They do have some concerns for the future, some needs and challenges.

Specifically, Americans are personally optimistic but corporately pessimistic. They show declining trust in institutions and other people.¹ In fact, “every subsection of the American population is dissatisfied with the honesty and the ethical behavior of people in this country.” Nationally, 78 percent say that on the whole, they are “dissatisfied with the honesty and standards of behavior in this country today.”² Among those who say they “seldom” or “never” attend church, the figure actually climbs to 79 percent.³ In other words, non-Christians are more concerned about declining morality than Christians.

A majority of Americans believe their fellow citizens are more likely to be materialistic, greedy, selfish, and criminal, while at the same time less likely to be neighborly, civic-minded, patriotic, volunteeristic, religious, honest, moral, and hard-working.⁴ They do not expect things to get better, either. When asked whether they thought “moral values in society” would be better or worse in 2025, Americans said “worse” rather than “better” by a two to one margin (62 percent compared with 31 percent).⁵

¹The Gallup Poll regularly tracks American confidence in sixteen key institutions (including the church). The figures show that confidence in each of these institutions has declined since the 1960s. Gallup and Lindsay, 136-139.

²Ibid., 100.

³Ibid.

⁴Patterson and Kim, 215.

⁵Gallup and Lindsay, 109.
While most believe the church could have a positive influence on society,\(^1\) Americans seem to place even greater weight on the importance of family. Gallup discovered that when Americans were asked what they perceived to be the “most important problem facing this country today,” the number one answer was really a collection of issues: “ethics; moral decline; family decline; children not raised right.”\(^2\) Clearly, Americans sense a lowering of moral standards, and they believe the issue needs to be addressed. According to Barna, an overwhelming majority of Americans (70 percent) agree that “if the traditional family unit falls apart, the stability of American society will collapse.”\(^3\)

Barna summarizes his research on the American family by arguing, “The most impressive conclusion I’ve drawn from this research is that people believe that the health of our families is vitally important. Regardless of their particular inclinations or beliefs, the vast majority of Americans care about the family. And deep down in their hearts, they seem to know that as goes the family, so goes American society.”\(^4\)

This same group of concerns (ethics, morality, and family issues) arises in a

\(^1\)Nearly 7 out of 10 Americans believe the church and religious leaders could have a “great deal of influence” in “raising the moral and ethical standards of the nation,” yet only 36 percent said the church was currently doing “a good job” of it. Ibid.


\(^3\)George Barna, The Future of the American Family (Chicago: Moody, 1993), 47.

\(^4\)Ibid., 19. The World Values Survey findings likewise highlight the priority of family in the minds of Americans. The survey divided life into five arenas: work, friends, family, politics, religion, and leisure. When Americans were asked to rank which of these aspects of life were “very important,” 92 percent said “family.” This was a full 30 percent more than the second-place ranking. Inglehart, Basáñez, and Moreno, V4-V9.
variety of surveys. For example, prior to the 2000 presidential election, a national survey sought to uncover what campaign issues were most crucial in the minds of Americans. “The problem of raising children in today’s culture” was ranked as a campaign issue of “top priority” by 41 percent of Americans, dwarfing other expected issues such as “the economy” (a “top priority” for only 29 percent).¹

In 1999, Gallup asked Americans to rate the importance of thirteen possible causes for the wave of school shootings in the United States. The number one reason given was the “breakdown of the American family.”² So, while politicians focused on violence in the media, gun control laws, and school security, Americans in general saw a different cause to the problem. For Americans, the family and the society are closely related and, apparently, neither is believed to be doing well.

Americans admit to other needs as well. Wolfe found that loneliness coming from a lack of connection with others is caused by being too busy.³ Nearly half of non-Christians say they are “too busy,”⁴ and more than one in three (36 percent) say they are “stressed out.”⁵ Clearly, if one is stretched thin by the hectic pace of work and daily life, less and less time is devoted to developing close relationships. One suburban housewife reflected on the situation of many in her community by admitting, “There’s nobody for


²Ibid., 181-182. Respondents ages 18-29, those closest to high-school age, also ranked the breakdown of the family as the number one reason for the recent school shootings.

³Wolfe, 251.

⁴Barna Research Group, “Most People Seek Control.”

⁵Barna Research Group, “How Americans See.”
backup. You're working. You're expected to work. Your child has an ear infection. There isn't a grandmother or an aunt or a cousin to call. . . . People are more isolated, . . . you're into your big house with the door closed, and you're not out there with your neighbors.”

This busyness and hard work have not led to financial freedom. More than one in three non-Christians (35 percent) describe themselves as being “in debt.” According to Barna, “If you want to get their attention, help them deal with their financial struggles.”

In fact, when Americans were asked what was the one thing about their life they would change if they could, the number one answer, given by 64 percent of Americans, was their “wealth.”

Another key area of need among Americans is health. Among non-Christians, 10 percent say they are “dealing with an addiction.” The same percentage claimed to have health problems “that limited their lifestyle and left them emotionally frustrated.”

In light of this research, one cannot help but conclude that non-Christian Americans speak inconsistently. More than seven in ten (71 percent) claim to be “completely/mostly satisfied with life” and about the same number (72 percent) say they

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1Wolfe, 252.

2Barna Research Group, “Most People Seek Control.”

3Barna, Evangelism That Works, 54.

4Patterson and Kim, 53.

5Barna Research Group, “Most People Seek Control.”

6Barna, Evangelism That Works, 54. This figure (10 percent) comes from unchurched Americans.
are excited about the future. On the surface, the promise of the good life is unnecessary—after all, it is already being experienced. The reality, however, is that Americans have a number of concerns, both for the present and the future. On the one hand, they see themselves as self-sufficient. This is clearly viewed as a good character quality. At the same time, about half admit they are still trying to figure out the meaning and purpose of life. Many (more than will admit to it) are in debt. Large numbers say they are too busy, stressed out, and some admit to failing health and struggles with addiction. These needs are exacerbated by the disconnection many Americans feel from their family and community and are searching, with little success, for a few good friends.

Despite the claims of satisfaction and self-sufficiency, then, Americans do sense a lack. Life is not as joyful and fulfilling as they would hope. As a nation, however, "we tend to harbor these feelings as secrets, unwilling to admit publicly that we’re not pleased with the way life is going."

Unfortunately, the evangelical gospel presentation never addresses these hidden needs and concerns. Because of this, the message loses impact, power, and credibility.

Instead of promises of "heaven" (where nearly everyone already believes they will go) or general assurances of "a wonderful plan," Americans would be more interested in this-worldly issues, such as how they might build stronger marriages and families, develop a character of integrity, find good health, have close friends, and deal with financial burdens. This would indeed be good news for Americans.

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1Barna and Hatch, 102.
Six: The Emphasis on Knowledge and Information

The gospel presentation is organized as a logical problem to be solved: God wants humanity to enjoy the good life. People are not enjoying it because of their sin. Jesus' death can erase the penalty of sin. People must accept Jesus because accepting Jesus results in forgiveness of sin and enjoyment of the good life.

This logical, propositional, problem-to-solution outline fails to connect or communicate powerfully for the average American today because it violates several key communication principles for communicating with impact. First, it is not specifically relevant in that it names life dissatisfaction and sin as key problems. Most Americans (71 percent), however, express basic satisfaction with life and few see themselves as sinners deserving death. Essentially, the presentation diagnoses Americans without their input, and labels them with a disease they do not believe they have.

Second, the formulaic approach does not allow the receptor to ponder the message and undergo self-reflection and self-confrontation. Yet, this process of creative thinking and discovery brings “the deepest, most abiding kind of learning.”

Third, the message is not illustrated from within the receptor’s culture. The idea of a blood sacrifice as necessary for forgiveness is a foreign and incomprehensible concept. Thus, the way in which Jesus’ death “solves” the problem does not “connect” with American culture.

Finally, as noted previously, good communication makes use of story and

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1Barna Research Group, “How Americans See.”

2Kraft, Christianity in Culture, 163.
metaphor and thus can appeal to both the intellect and the emotions. The gospel presentation takes the gospel (which is narrative) and presents it as a mathematical formula. The story of Jesus' passion is turned into an answer to the problem of our sin and God's justice and mercy. The story ceases to be a story and instead appears to be a solution to a problem—a cure for a disease.

In the process, human emotions are ignored and even discouraged. The propositions of the presentation, while "true," lose their force because they are not coupled with culturally appropriate narrative, metaphor, and analogy. The suspicious view of emotions is surprisingly different from that of Finney, who argued, "No being can look at the great truths of religion, as truths, and not feel deeply about them. The devil cannot. He believes and trembles. Angels in heaven feel in view of these things. God feels. An intellectual conviction of truth is always accompanied with feeling of some kind."\(^1\)

The typical evangelical gospel presentation, however, downplays the role of emotion, which is striking when one considers that the news presented is supposed to be good news that will affect one's entire life on earth as well as life through eternity. Yet, in the face of this amazing good news, the new believer is not expected to feel, but rather, to learn the correct information and make a logical decision based on the authoritative Word of God.

Seven: The Call for an Abstract Response

The response required by the typical evangelical gospel presentation is twofold. First, receptors are encouraged to intellectually respond by “receiving,” “accepting,” or “believing in” Jesus. This response, as well as the less frequent call to “repent,” is inactive in the sense that it signifies a passive acknowledgment or intellectual assent of something. Second, receptors who wish to “receive/accept/believe” are invited to pray.

Both responses are relatively comfortable for most Americans. The response is internal, it requires minimal action and, apparently, little long-term commitment. Also, since most Americans already pray, the murmuring of a short prayer does not pose much of a threat. If hesitant to pray aloud, Bright suggests that a silent prayer, with an audible “amen,” will suffice. The response expected at the conclusion of the gospel presentation, on the surface, then, is quite culturally sensitive to the American public.

At the same time, sharing a religious viewpoint and suggesting that failure to accept it will lead to negative eternal consequences goes contrary to a core American value: tolerance. Americans hold to what Wolfe calls “quiet faith” in the sense that they view “religious commitments as private: no one should tell them what is right, just as they should not tell anyone else.”

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3 Wolfe, 52.
As noted at the start of this chapter, Americans view tolerance as a core moral
value.\(^1\) Americans value tolerance to such an extent that “reluctance to exclude turns out
to be as powerful, if not more powerful, a moral force as a requirement to believe.”\(^2\) One
is expected to be tolerant even (or perhaps especially) in the religious arena. In the
middle-class mind, a moral person should not use religion to establish rules for someone
else to live by, nor should someone else use religion to tell them how they personally
should conduct their lives.\(^3\) This view is demonstrated by an interviewee who said,
“Whether it’s the Koran or the Bible or Gita or whatever, they have these ten
commandments or eighteen commandments or twenty commandments. . . . All these
things are there, you know, brotherhood and all, that’s everywhere.”\(^4\) In short, Americans
appear to have concluded that “everyone should leave everyone else alone.”\(^5\)

The presentation of the traditional evangelical gospel message can be seen as a
violation of the moral value of tolerance. The message involves the clear condemnation
of people as sinners, separated from God, and, by inference, going to hell unless they
believe in and receive Jesus, who is the one way out. Failure to respond as the
presentation directs means one is doomed, for the wages of sin is death.

This message is not well received by many. Even Christians may feel uneasy with

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\(^1\) Rokeach discovered that “Broadmindedness” ranked within the top five
instrumental values of both males and females. *The Nature*, 58.

\(^2\) Wolfe, 53.

\(^3\) Ibid., 55.

\(^4\) Ibid., 63.

\(^5\) Ibid.
such an approach. This common American perspective was demonstrated by a deeply religious interviewee, who, in spite of her commitment to God, reasoned that “we need God’s forgiveness because we are imperfect. And because we are, how can we be certain that there is only one true way? To condemn others for lacking the proper way to God is to substitute one’s own evaluation for God’s.” Barna discovered that a majority of those not “born again” agree that “someone trying to tell you about their religious beliefs” is usually annoying. Ironically, non-Christians are more likely to be annoyed by this than by hearing profanity on the radio.

Not only are Americans uneasy with what is perceived to be an intolerant approach, most also disagree with the central teaching of the evangelical gospel presentation: that one’s eternal destiny depends on the acceptance of Jesus Christ as Savior. The vast majority of non-Christians (81 percent) disagree with this proposition. This does not indicate that non-Christians are resistant to religious insight or are apathetic regarding spiritual issues, because more than eight out of ten (81 percent) of them agree with the statement, “It is important for you to experience spiritual growth.” It does mean, however, that the basic premise—the core teaching of the gospel presentation—is a priori rejected by most of the target audience.

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1Ibid., 52.

2Barna, Absolute Confusion, 168.

3Ibid., 171.

4Barna and Hatch, 194.

5Ibid.
Eight: The Supposition of Separation Between God and Humanity

The proposition that humans are sinful, wicked, and distant from a holy God is central to the traditional evangelical presentation of the gospel. It is often illustrated by a human being, separated from God by an uncrossable chasm. It is only after “receiving Jesus” that the cross can act as a bridge for the individual to draw nearer to the holy God. These core assumptions of wickedness and separation from God run contrary to American beliefs.

As noted earlier, Americans do not believe people are evil, but rather, that people are basically good.¹ Barna’s research verifies this American optimism regarding human nature and shows that non-Christians are even more optimistic than Christians.²

Second, the gospel presentation suggests that sinful humanity is distant from a holy God. This supposition runs contrary to the personal spiritual experience of most Americans and can be demonstrated by a review of American beliefs about personal interactions with the divine through prayer, the experience of miracles, and divine guidance and comfort.

According to the World Values Survey, the United States is a praying nation. When respondents were asked how often they “pray to God outside of religious services,” 78 percent of Americans said they did so “often” or “sometimes,” compared

¹Wolfe, 85.

²Barna, What Americans Believe, 89.
with the global average of 49 percent.¹ In another survey, at about this same time, a
majority of Americans (55 percent) said prayer had become more important to them over
the past five years. Only 1 percent said prayer had become less important in their lives.²

Gallup’s research verifies this view of Americans as a people who pray. In fact,
95 percent of American adults say they pray to a supreme being.³ More than four out of
five Americans pray at some time during a typical week,⁴ and the most common themes
involve requests for their family’s well-being (98 percent)⁵ and giving thanks to God “for
what he has done in their lives” (95 percent of those who pray mention this).⁶

Not only do they pray. Americans overwhelmingly believe their prayers make a
difference. Of the 95 percent who pray, 97 percent say their prayers are heard⁷ and 95

¹Inglehart, Basáñez, and Moreno, V179. Only 3 of the 43 non-American societies
surveyed said they prayed more often. A similar question, “Do you take some moments
of prayer, meditation, or contemplation or something like that?” was answered in the
affirmative by 84 percent of Americans, higher than the global average of 63 percent
(V178).

²Gallup and Lindsay, 48.

³Barna Research Group, “Faith Commitment.” According to Gallup, 36 percent
claim to pray once daily, another 36 percent pray two or more times per day, and 3
percent say they pray “constantly.” Gallup and Lindsay, 46.

⁴Barna Research Group, “Faith Commitment.”

⁵Gallup and Lindsay, 47. Not all pray for the well-being of others, however. I
mentioned American prayer habits to a nurse at Lakeland Hospital, St. Joseph, MI
(December 17, 2000), and she shared how she had repeatedly asked God to make
something bad happen to her ex-husband while he was in bed with his new lover. She
was a devout Catholic, she said, but seemed to feel that such a prayer was perfectly
appropriate.

⁶Barna Research Group, “Faith Commitment.”

⁷Gallup and Lindsay, 45.
percent say their requests are answered. Among all American adults, 89 percent agree to the statement, “There is a God who watches over you and answers your prayers.” These data on the popularity of prayer in America suggest that in spite of their varied belief (or lack of belief) in traditional Christian doctrine, Americans still desire and sense a connection with the divine. In fact, in response to their prayers, more than six out of ten Americans (62 percent) say they have felt “divinely inspired” or “led by God.”

This experience and interaction with the divine is further illustrated by Americans’ confidence in miracles. Nationally, 79 percent say they believe in miracles, with an additional 9 percent unsure whether they believe or not. Even among those who say they seldom or never attend church, a strong majority (70 percent) believe in miracles.

This high level of belief in supernatural activity continues when non-Christians are questioned about angels. Over seven in ten (71 percent) believe “angels exist and

\footnote{Ibid., 47.}
\footnote{Barna Research Group, “Faith Commitment.”}
\footnote{Gallup and Lindsay, 48. Exactly the same percentage (62 percent) say their prayers have been answered by getting what they requested. The most frequent answers to prayer, however, are a sense of peace (96 percent report experiencing this) and a sense of hope (reported by 94 percent).}
\footnote{Ibid., 26. People not only believe that miracles happen today, but a majority of non-Christians (58 percent) say they believe that “all the miracles described in the Bible actually took place.” Barna and Hatch, 191.}
influence peoples lives."¹ In fact, an American who is not "born again" is more likely to believe in angels than in the Holy Spirit.²

In summary, then, Americans do not seem to feel that God is inaccessible or impossibly distant. In fact, 82 percent of all Americans agreed with the statement, "I am sometimes very conscious of the presence of God."³ So, although their beliefs may be incorrect, and Bible knowledge almost non-existent, most Americans feel God is near.

To this American audience comes the proclamation by evangelicals that humans are sinful, and those who have not accepted Jesus are hopelessly separated from God. Clearly, this directly contradicts the personal experience of most Americans. As has been noted repeatedly, Americans believe people are basically good, most Americans already pray, and most believe God hears and answers. More than eight out of ten agree that they are "sometimes very conscious of the presence of God."⁴

To be told, then, that God is actually repelled by their sin and distant from them simply does not ring true to their experience.⁵ Thus, the evangelical gospel formula presented no longer has validity, because the "problem" of separation from God is not perceived as a problem at all.

¹Barna and Hatch, 191.

²Ibid. Sixty-six percent of those not "born again" say the Holy Spirit is "a symbol ... but not a living entity."

³Gallup and Lindsay, 72.

⁴Ibid.

⁵For Americans, past personal experience is a key source of information upon which they base life decisions. So, when asked how they make moral or ethical decisions, the number one answer by an overwhelming margin was, "your past experience." Barna, Absolute Confusion, 245.
Nine: The Presentation of the Cross as the Salvific Event

The concept that Jesus died on the cross for humanity's sin is familiar to most Americans. Nevertheless, it remains a foreign concept. This was illustrated by an anonymous letter from a pastor, published in the *Adventist Review*, the "general paper" of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. The pastor wrote: “We don’t have crosses anymore. What can I do as a pastor to make this imagery real for the people of the twenty-first century? Wouldn’t it be better to replace it with something more comprehensible for moderns?” Calvin Rock, a high ranking church official, responded vigorously, defending the cross as “still relevant.” Rhetorically he asked, “Relax our emphasis? Never!” Rock then concluded with a poem that called for every Christian to “Proclaim the triumph of the Lamb and the cross!”

In spite of Rock’s defense, the question raised by the pastor is legitimate. The concept of blood sacrifice bringing atonement seems illogical and strange to American ears. Americans miss the symbolism and instead cringe in horror at the bloody slaughter of an innocent life. Why would God require blood in order to forgive? In a country where it is illegal to beat a dog, the idea of slaughtering a lamb for religious purposes, or, worse yet, offering up one’s son to die, seems superstitious at best and, more likely, is seen as cruel and barbaric. So, while nearly all have heard something about Jesus’ death on the cross, and while many believe he did so to pay the penalty for their sin, the cross fails to convict or connect as it would have with the Jewish audience of Jesus’ day.\(^1\)

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\(^2\)Missionaries have long recognized that in some cultures, the death of Jesus on the cross seems of little importance. Other aspects of Jesus’ ministry (such as the washing of his disciples’ feet) may actually communicate more powerfully. Jon Dybdahl,
Ten: The Use of the Bible as an Authority

The typical evangelical presentation uses frequent Bible texts as authoritative proofs of truth. At the conclusion of the presentation, receptors are assured that, even if they do not feel any different after receiving Jesus, they can know that they are saved "based on the trustworthiness of God Himself and His Word." Clearly, the authors of the dominant presentations assumed that their receptors already held the Bible to be the authoritative word of God. Yet, today, such an assumption may no longer be safe.

Over the years, the Gallup Poll has frequently questioned Americans regarding their views on the Bible. In 1998, Gallup provided Americans with three different views of the Bible and asked which one most closely reflected their own beliefs. Nearly half (47 percent) saw the Bible as "the inspired word of God but not everything in it should be taken literally." One third believed the Bible to be "the actual word of God and is to be taken literally, word for word." Of the remainder, 17 percent thought that "the Bible is an ancient book of fables, legends, history, and moral precepts recorded by man."

This synchronic view of attitudes towards the Bible does not reveal the shift in belief that has occurred during the last half of the twentieth century. Gallup summarizes the change: "This move toward understanding the Bible as the inspired, and not necessarily as the actual, word of God is one of the most dramatic shifts in religious beliefs since the 1960's. As recently as 1963, two persons in three viewed the Bible as the

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1Bright, "Now That You."

2Gallup and Lindsay, 35.
actual word of God, to be taken literally, word for word. Today, only one person in three still holds to that interpretation.\

While the Bible is still viewed with reverence by most Americans, it has lost some of its authority in everyday life. Fewer than half (43 percent) of non-Christian Americans believe that the Bible is “totally accurate in all of its teachings.” However, when the statement posed was, “The Bible provides us with moral truths that are the same for all people in all situations, without exception,” a surprising 54 percent of these non-Christians agreed. Evidently, non-Christians have greater confidence in the Bible’s basic moral principles and less confidence in the Bible’s specific teachings.

On the Bible’s personal authority in life, there is even less agreement. When faced with life questions about what is moral and ethical, the largest segment of non-Christians said they based their decisions on past personal experience (33 percent), compared with only 11 percent who said they relied primarily upon the Bible.

The Bible’s lack of authority when facing real life could perhaps be best illustrated by the response to a 1998 Gallup Poll dealing with the relationship between husband and wife. Half of the survey sample were asked: “Do you agree or disagree with the following statement—‘A wife should submit graciously to the servant leadership of her husband’?” In response, 26 percent agreed, 69 percent disagreed, and 5 percent

\(^1\)Ibid., 36. Emphasis original.

\(^2\)Barna and Hatch, 190.

\(^3\)Ibid., 191.

\(^4\)Barna, *Absolute Confusion*, 245.

\(^5\)Ibid., 246.
expressed no opinion. The other half of the sample were given a slightly different question, which added three words—“taken from the Bible.” The full question posed was: “Do you agree or disagree with the following statement taken from the Bible—‘A wife should submit graciously to the servant leadership of her husband’?” To this second question, 35 percent agreed, 60 percent disagreed, and 5 percent expressed no opinion.¹

As one compares the difference in responses when it was made explicit that the injunction to submit was from the Bible (only 9 percent changed their answers to move into harmony with the Bible), it becomes clear that the authority of the Bible has a minimal impact on how most Americans believe.

In light of American views on the Bible, it is not surprising that many Americans have minimal knowledge of its contents. Among the general population, 38 percent believe the entire Bible was written after Jesus’ death. Nearly 40 percent believe either the book of Isaiah is in the New Testament or do not know.² Fewer than half can name the first book of the Bible, and only 64 percent know where Jesus was born.³ Twelve percent identify “Joan of Arc” as the wife of Noah. Almost half (49 percent) believe the Bible teaches that “money is the root of all evil.” Over half (56 percent) believe the Bible teaches that “the single most important task in life is taking care of one’s family.” Three Americans in four also believe the Bible teaches “God helps those who help

²Barna and Hatch, 190.
³Gallup and Lindsay, 49. Nearly all Americans (95 percent) know that Mary was the mother of Jesus.
themselves." Among those who are not "born again," 81 percent identify this American folk proverb as a teaching from Scripture.

When asked to name the first four books of the New Testament, that is, the four Gospels, 37 percent named all four (down from 42 percent in 1982), but exactly half could not name even one of the four. One in four Americans does not know what religious event is celebrated on Easter, and three in five do not know what the term "Holy Trinity" refers to. It should not be surprising, then, that 86 percent of Americans cannot define the "great commission," seven out of ten have no idea what John 3:16 says (many do not even know it refers to a passage of Scripture), and 69 percent cannot provide any definition for the term "the gospel." Only 4 percent of all Americans understood what "the great commission" was referring to, knew the basic content of John 3:16, and could provide a definition for the term "the gospel."

Most Americans, then, revere the Bible yet apparently are not familiar with its contents. Even if they were, most would not be willing to change their own beliefs to

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3Gallup and Lindsay, 49. In addition, only 34 percent knew who delivered the Sermon on the Mount.

4Gospel could be described either as one of the four New Testament "Gospels" or as the good news of salvation which comes through Jesus. Either of these definitions was accepted as correct. Barna Research Group, "Evangelism," 19 April 2001, http://www.barna.org/cgi-bin/PageCategory.asp?CategoryID=18 (15 June 2001).

5Ibid.

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match those espoused by Scripture. 1 Wolfe noted that “Americans are not comfortable being told what to do, even if, perhaps especially if, the teller is a supernatural force whose words are meant as commands.” 2

If Americans do not read the Bible for ethical instruction, what do they gain from their reading? Gallup discovered that the strongest reason people read is “to feel closer to God.” 3 Americans, then, seem to focus less on the head, and more on the heart. The Bible is used less as an instruction manual or ethical guide, and more as an aid to assist one in encountering the divine. For Americans the Bible is not primarily an authority one submits to, but a place where one can encounter God.

In the usual evangelical gospel presentation, however, the Bible is employed as an authority. At the conclusion of each gospel presentation, the recipient of salvation is expected to do five things. The first assigned task is to read the Bible. Again, given the general availability of the Bible in America, and the wide esteem with which it is viewed, this uniform suggestion makes sense to many Americans. However, many Americans are also functionally or marginally illiterate, and assigning “Bible reading” as a task for them could be threatening and actually serve to discourage rather than encourage their newfound faith. 4 This problem is heightened by the fact that the most commonly owned and read Bible is the King James Version. Barna notes that, “given the literary skills of the

1Patterson and Kim, 27, 199.
2Wolfe, 82.
3Gallup and Lindsay, 51.
4According to Barna, a United States Department of Education study found that 54 percent of American adults were functionally or marginally illiterate. Barna, Second Coming, 4.
population, slightly more than three out of four adults are incapable of reading and understanding the KJV due to their literary limitations."

Clearly, very few non-Christians hold the view, "God said it, and I believe it, and that settles it for me." Bible quotations are persuasive "proof" for a very small minority of non-Christian Americans. Not only that, but general appeals to read the Bible pose a literary problem for most Americans who cannot understand the Bible version they may possess. All this poses a serious challenge, not only for the gospel presentation, but for all conservative Christian evangelists and pastors who base their messages on a source of authority that is not recognized (and often not understood) by their audience.

Summary

Research demonstrates that Americans today hold different presuppositions and face needs and challenges which are different from those of their grandparents. Research also shows that Americans are still seeking after God. They still want to develop spiritually, and they want a closer relationship with God. They want deliverance and salvation.

The evangelical gospel presentation has attempted to bring the good news to Americans in a way they can understand. However, while the traditional presentation has been somewhat effective for many years, its ability to communicate with clarity and impact is diminishing as American society changes. The same message falls on different

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1Ibid.

2Among all Americans (approximately 40 percent of whom are born-again Christians), only 37 percent said they accepted the Bible's moral advice "without question." Patterson and Kim, 209.
ears and thus no longer remains the same message.

But can this gospel message be changed? A second question is whether doing so would be contrary to the Bible. Ultimately, whether or not a message is culturally appealing is of secondary importance. The evangelical Christian's primary question must be whether or not his or her presentation of the gospel is faithful to the Bible. In short, would a change to the typical presentation, for the sake of cultural relevance and impact, be a denial of the biblical gospel? This question is addressed in chapter 6.
CHAPTER 6

THE TEN CHARACTERISTICS AND CONVERSION IN
LUKE-ACTS: DIFFERENT GOSPELS?

Introduction

Thus far in this study, I have summarized the typical evangelical gospel presentation in North America and then critiqued it from the perspective of communication theory. This critique demonstrated that the usual way of describing how one is saved fails to communicate optimally with many Americans today.

The question which now begs to be addressed is this: What does the Bible say about how one passes over from death to life? Does the typical gospel presentation accurately describe the essence of salvation according to the Scriptures? Is the typical presentation truly the essence of what the Bible has to say, or are there other biblical ways of incorporating personal salvation?

For the analysis of the typical evangelical gospel presentation, I have chosen Luke-Acts as the scriptural background. These two books constitute the largest segment of the New Testament written by one author. They narrate the birth and early stages of Christianity and include the largest number of conversion stories in the New Testament. Before making the comparison between the typical gospel presentation and the reception
of salvation in Luke-Acts, I will provide a brief overview of several stories of conversion in the two books.


It is evident that Luke has a clear interest in the subject of conversion. In *Conversion in the New Testament*, Robert D. Witherup notes that “the gospel of Luke shows more interest in the notion of conversion than Mark and Matthew combined,” while Acts “has an intense interest in conversion unparalleled in any other part of the NT.” In fact, Witherup argues that Acts is essentially “a series of conversions . . . which describe the spread of the gospel to the ends of the earth.” Others besides Witherup have noted the important place of conversion in Luke-Acts, as well as Luke’s interest in salvation in general.

Specifically, I will explore nine conversion accounts in Luke-Acts. While scholars have not traditionally classified and studied conversion stories as a specific genre, Robert Allen Black persuasively argues that “conversion story’ is simply a

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2Ibid., 62.


common sense category” which is “generally recognized.”

So, while the precise definition of the category may be disputed (as is the case, for example, with the parables)

the goal is not primarily to categorize or even define, but to illuminate and clarify the material.

I will explore four individual conversion accounts from the gospel of Luke, and five from the book of Acts. The pericopes are as follows:

Luke 19:1-10 Zacchaeus and his household
Acts 8:26-40 The Ethiopian Eunuch
Acts 10:1-11:18 Cornelius and his household
Acts 16:11-16 Lydia and her household
Acts 16:16-34 The Philippian Jailer and his household


2Ibid., 14.

3Robert H. Stein admits the difficulty of defining and counting the parables of Jesus and notes that defining parable is “hopeless” in the view of some scholars. An Introduction to the Parables of Jesus (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1981), 22. This difficulty, however, does not mean that the parables should not be studied as a genre.

4R. Black, 16.

5R. Black lists a total of ten conversion stories in Acts, which include the five I am considering, as well as the following: Pentecost, Solomon’s portico, the Samaritans and Simon, Sergius Paulus, and Pisidian Antioch (1). The account of Crispus in Acts 18 is included by Matson, 168. The five I have chosen are generally considered the “prominent individual conversion stories in Acts.” Witherup, 63. Others who agree include Rees Odell Bryant, “The Role of Baptism in Pauline Theology of Conversion” (D.Miss. thesis, Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, CA, 1990), 50; Cedric B. Johnson and H. Newton Malony, Christian Conversion: Biblical and Psychological Perspectives (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1982), 87.
The Expert in the Law


Jesus responded, “What is written in the law? How do you read it?” (Luke 10:26). In doing this, Jesus directed the scribe “to their shared source of authority: the law.”² The scribe answered by quoting from Deut 6:5 and Lev 19:18, saying, “Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind; and, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself’” (Luke 10:27). Jesus affirmed that the scribe’s answer was correct, then added, “Do this and you will live” (Luke 10:28).

In this account, the reception of salvation depends on whole-hearted love for God and humanity. This love must be more than an emotion, however. Luke put Jesus’ words in the Greek present imperative, which suggests a continuing, abiding love expressed in action. Furthermore, the passage continues with Jesus explaining that one’s neighbor is anyone in need. A neighbor can be someone of a different ethnicity and religion. It includes even Samaritans! This directly contradicted the view of the Pharisees, who taught explicitly that one’s neighbors did not include Samaritans, gentiles, and tax


²Ibid., 1024.
collectors. Thus, Jesus’ answer to the lawyer was both familiar and unexpected.

The Rich Ruler

The next time Jesus faced the issue of how to attain eternal life, the question came from the lips of a rich ruler. “Good teacher,” he asked, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” (Luke 18:18). As he had done with the lawyer, Jesus referred the ruler to the law. Specifically, he reminded him to honor his parents and to avoid adultery, murder, theft, and giving false testimony (vs. 20).

When the ruler affirms that he has obeyed these commands, Jesus informs him that he still lacks one thing that is necessary for eternal life. “Sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me” (Luke 18:22). H. Louis Baugher points out that Jesus here offers an incredible investment opportunity. In exchange for investing his earthly wealth on behalf of the poor, the ruler can have unspeakable riches for eternity.

Unfortunately, when the ruler is faced with the choice of his money or his life, he apparently chooses his money. Luke tells us that the lawyer became very sad (vs. 23). Jesus then stresses the great difficulty for the rich to enter the kingdom and the fact that, with God, all things are possible.

Central to this dissertation is the response necessary for eternal life. Once again,

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it is quite simple: Honor your parents and avoid adultery, theft, murder, and giving false
witness. Finally, if all these commandments have been kept, sell all, give to the poor, and
follow Jesus.

Zacchaeus and His Household

This story of the diminutive tax collector has traditionally been a favorite of
young children. Its message, however, is important for people of all ages. Darrell Bock
suggests that Luke tells the story at least partly “to picture the elements of conversion.”
Zacchaeus thus becomes “the model respondent to Jesus’ initiative.”

The account begins with Jesus passing through Jericho. Zacchaeus, a wealthy
chief tax collector, wishes to see Jesus. He is unable to force his way through the crowd,
so he climbs a sycamore tree to gain a better vantage point. Jesus stops beneath the tree,
calls Zacchaeus down by name, and informs him, “I must stay at your house today” (Luke
19:5).

The onlookers are aghast that Jesus has gone to be the guest of a sinner.
Zacchaeus, however, stands and announces that he gives half of his possessions to the
poor, and if he has wrongly taken any money, he repays it four times over. Jesus then

\[\text{Bock, Luke 9, 1513.}\]
\[\text{Ibid., 1518.}\]
\[\text{Jericho was “one of the greatest taxation centers in Palestine,” so it is not surprising that Zacchaeus was so wealthy. William Barclay, The Gospel of Luke, rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975), 234.}\]
\[\text{One should note that both verbs in the Greek are in the present tense, i.e., Zacchaeus says he gives and repays. While these verbs are usually translated as futuristic presents, I believe the passage makes more sense if translated as iterative or constative presents. In other words, Zacchaeus defends himself in front of the muttering crowd by}\]
announces, “Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost” (Luke 19:9-10).

Before analyzing Zacchaeus’s response that brought salvation, several observations should be made. First of all, Zacchaeus would have been despised and hated because he collected taxes for Rome and thus was viewed as betraying his own countrymen. A tax collector was also automatically classified as a “sinner.” In Judaism of Jesus’ day, the designation “sinner” referred to a person who broke a religious law or behaved in an evil or immoral way. In addition, “sinner” was an ascribed social status and not simply a description of one’s behavior. Certain professions were considered dishonorable, and all those involved in such careers were, by default, considered sinners even if there was no evidence of involvement in sinful behavior. Tax collection was one such career.

As a sinner, a person was deprived of civil rights, meaning that, as John informing everyone of his habitual generosity toward the poor.


2Ibid., 327.

3Peter Rhea Jones, The Teaching of the Parables (Nashville: Broadman, 1982), 169. For a careful discussion of the dimensions of the word “sinner,” including, of course, a discussion of tax collectors, see David A. Neale, None But the Sinners (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1991). The distrust of and dislike for tax collectors seems to be present in all cultures, but it was especially strong in Judaism. Richard C. Trench attempted to show how deep this distrust was when he quoted a modern Greek proverb, “When the devil is poor, he becomes a tax-gatherer.” Notes on the Parables of Our Lord (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubener & Co., 1893), 374.


5Ibid.
Nolland noted succinctly, Zacchaeus “is a nobody.” The status of a “sinner” was so low that Jews were even allowed to lie to them. Being a tax collector, and thus a sinner, “led to expulsion from the people of God, which involved an exclusion from society of a sort that we can hardly now picture.”

For Jesus to go to the home of Zacchaeus (and more so to also eat with him) was scandalous. In Jewish culture of the time such interaction made Jesus a “partner in crime.” Jesus’ pronouncement of salvation for such a tax collector and his “house” was equally surprising. Nevertheless, Luke tells the story, apparently as a deliberate attempt to highlight the elements involved in receiving salvation.

First, Zacchaeus sought Jesus. Second, Zacchaeus welcomed Jesus gladly. Third, Zacchaeus made a statement reflecting his generosity toward the poor and his willingness to repay anyone he had treated dishonestly. Finally, Jesus announced salvation because Zacchaeus was “a son of Abraham” (Luke 19:9).

The Criminal on the Cross

As Luke tells the story of Jesus’ crucifixion, he records a conversation between Jesus and the two criminals who were crucified with him, a scene Joseph Fitzmyer

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5 Ibid., 1513.

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suggests "becomes the peak of the Lucan scene of crucifixion" because it reveals both
Jesus' innocence and "his salvific mercy to one of the dregs of humanity."\(^1\)

In Luke's account, one criminal insults Jesus by sarcastically asking, "Aren't you
the Christ? Save yourself and us!" (Luke 23:39). This sneering is met with rebuke by the
second criminal. "'Don't you fear God,' he said, 'since you are under the same sentence?
We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done
nothing wrong.' Then he said, 'Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom'"  

Jesus responds to this request with the promise, "I tell you the truth, today you
will be with me in paradise" (Luke 23:43). By paradise, Jesus is referring to the "future
dwelling place of God's people,"\(^2\) which carried the connotation of a perfect garden.\(^3\)
Lenski describes paradise in modern terms with the simple statement that "paradise is
heaven, the abode of God."\(^4\) With his response, Jesus declares that, although he is not yet
crowned as messiah and king, he is already willing and able to give "royal clemency to

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(Garden City, NJ: Doubleday, 1985), 1508.


Broadman & Holman, 2000), 395.

1946), 1146. A helpful survey of the term "paradise" is also found in Fitzmeyer, 1510-  
1511.
those who appeal to him.”¹ In short, Jesus is extending salvation to yet another person² and confirming that he “is indeed the messiah who brings salvation.”³

On the cross, the criminal receives the promise of salvation. While not much is known from Luke’s account about this criminal, during the crucifixion itself, Luke records more words from the mouth of this seeker of salvation than from the lips of Jesus. Through his words, the second criminal reveals a number of important things about himself.

First, the criminal⁴ respects God as the final judge (“Don’t you fear God?”). Second, he takes responsibility for his actions and admits that his punishment is justly deserved (“We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve”). The criminal knew that his prior acts deserved punishment. His acknowledgment of this fact, according to Robert Tannehill, demonstrates “an aspect of repentance.”⁵ Third, the criminal declares Jesus’ innocence (“But this man has done nothing wrong”). Finally, the criminal makes a request of Jesus which demonstrates his belief in Jesus’ resurrection, his power to save and his final future rule as kingly messiah (“Jesus, remember me when you

¹Nolland, Luke 18, 1153.

²Ibid. Nolland writes, “In each ‘today’ in which Jesus was encountered during his ministry, the encounter brought salvation. Even now, in the hour of his own death, Jesus brings salvation.” Nolland, Luke 18, 1153.


⁴Romans were not usually crucified, hence, it is probable that the criminal was a Jew. Lenski, 1145.

⁵Tannehill, 343. Fitzmyer refers to the second criminal’s “implicit repentance” (1509).
come into your kingdom"). In short, the admitted criminal asks Jesus, the one he believes
is messiah king, for royal clemency. With his response, Jesus indicates that this
clemency is given. While the criminal dies for his sin, he receives an acquittal from the
Judge of the living and the dead.

The Ethiopian Eunuch

In Acts 8, Luke records that following Stephen’s martyrdom, the fledgling church
in Jerusalem comes under persecution. Philip, who had previously been ordained as one
of the seven (Acts 6:5), went to Samaria and began to preach and perform miraculous
signs, with great success (Acts 8:4-25).

Philip’s next evangelistic endeavor was initiated by an angel of the Lord, who
directed Philip to a specific road where he intercepted a chariot carrying an Ethiopian
eunuch. The Spirit instructed Philip to approach the chariot and, as he did so, Philip
overheard the eunuch reading from Isa 53:7-8. Unable to understand the passage, the
eunuch invited Philip up into the chariot. Beginning with that passage from Isaiah, Philip
“told him the good news about Jesus” (Acts 8:35).

Luke then records that when the chariot approached a place with water, the
eunuch asked to be baptized. Both “went down into the water and Philip baptized him”

Nolland, Luke 18, 1151; Tannehill, 343.

Fitzmeyer, 1508.

3The best manuscripts do not include vs. 37, “Philip said, ‘If you believe with all
your heart, you may.’ The eunuch answered, ‘I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of
God.’” This verse was likely a later addition to the original by the Western text. Johannes
Albright and C. S. Mann (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967), 78-79. See also David J.
Williams, Acts, New International Biblical Commentary (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster,
(Acts 8:38). The Spirit mysteriously removed Philip from the eunuch's vision, while the eunuch "went on his way rejoicing" (Acts 8:39), an emotion that Luke elsewhere links with the reception of salvation (see Acts 16:34).

Several features of this conversion story are especially applicable to this study. First, Luke gives a rather specific description of the convert himself. He was an Ethiopian, from a land in upper Egypt and the Sudan. For Luke's readers, this man would have been viewed as coming from the very outer limits of their world.

Furthermore, the Ethiopian was a high official in the court of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians. He was a respected man of high standing.

Luke also states that this Ethiopian official was returning home after worshiping in Jerusalem. Scholars are divided as to the precise status of this man in relation to Judaism. He could have been a Jewish proselyte, a Gentile God-fearer, or simply

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2Munck, 78.

3R. Black, 136; Bruce, 178-179.

4Candace was the title reserved for the queen mother. Larkin, Acts, 132; Munck, 78; Fitzmyer, 412; and Bruce, 175. According to Bruce, the King was considered too sacred to be involved in the common secular responsibilities of governing, so these responsibilities fell to the queen mother.

5Fitzmyer, 410; Larkin, Acts, 133; and Lenski, 335, all suggest he was a proselyte.

6This view is held by Munck, 78.
someone whose worship in Jerusalem indicates spiritual receptivity. Whatever the case, Luke presents him as a spiritual man who was studying the Scriptures and who worshiped the God of Israel. In spite of these admirable qualities, this man would have been excluded from full participation and acceptance among the Jews because he was a eunuch. According to Deut 23:1, “No one who has been emasculated by crushing or cutting may enter the assembly of the LORD.”

Clearly, this man’s status as a eunuch is central. Only once in the narrative does Luke refer to him as an Ethiopian and Luke never clarifies whether he was a proselyte, a God-fearer, or merely a Gentile seeker. What Luke does emphasize is his physical condition. Six times he is called a eunuch. As such, he was an outsider, permanently excluded from God’s people.

While it seems likely that the Ethiopian was a Gentile, Cornelius is usually understood to be the first Gentile convert. This problem is less acute if two factors are kept in mind. First, interpreters have assumed that the account of Cornelius is primarily about the conversion of the first Gentile. Luke, on the other hand, focuses on the need to include converted Gentiles as full brothers in the faith. In Acts 11, Peter received criticism, not because Cornelius (a Gentile) was baptized, but because “You went into the

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1Beverly Roberts Gaventa, *From Darkness to Light*, Overtures to Biblical Theology, no. 20 (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), 104. Gaventa argues that Luke’s mention of the Ethiopian’s worship in Jerusalem did not necessarily mean he was a God-fearer, but rather, it “merely indicates the receptivity of this particular individual.”

2Larkin unconvincingly suggests that since it would have been difficult for a castrated Gentile to obtain a scroll, the term eunuch refers simply to a high official who was not literally castrated. Strangely, Larkin later concludes that the account demonstrates “the inclusiveness of the gospel,” which overcomes race, distance, and physical defect. Larkin, *Acts*, 133, 136.
house of uncircumsized men and ate with them” (Acts 11:3). While the eunuch is presented as the first Gentile convert, Cornelius was the first Gentile convert who was accepted into the community as an equal.

Second, Luke does not focus on the eunuch as a Gentile, but rather, as a eunuch. This conversion, then, is about a man who was distanced from God geographically, racially, and physically. Not only was he a foreigner, he also had a physical defect which caused him to remain a perpetual outsider.

A third theme in this conversion account is the role and initiative of God. An angel of the Lord directed Philip to a certain place, at a certain time,\(^1\) to meet a certain man. Once Philip arrived there, the Spirit told Philip to stay near the chariot. After the baptism, the Spirit mysteriously “took Philip away” (8:39). God took the initiative, and Philip’s role “is largely of acquiescence.”\(^2\)

Luke does not seem particularly interested in the details of what the Ethiopian had to do or believe in order to go on his way rejoicing. Already, the eunuch was a worshiper of the God of Israel. He was already searching the Scriptures, but did not yet understand

\(^1\)In Acts 8:26, the NIV translates the words of the angel as a directive to “Go south to the road—the desert road—that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.” The word “south” can be taken temporally to mean “at noon.” This is usually the case in the LXX, and is also the better translation here. Gaventa, 101; Larkin, Acts, 131-132. This ties the conversion of the eunuch (at noon on the road) with the conversion of Saul at noon on his way to Damascus (Acts 22:6 and 26:13). More importantly, it highlights the fact that the meeting between Philip and the eunuch is orchestrated by God. Midday was not the usual time for travel, due to the extreme heat. The order of the angel, then, “is itself unexpected, even absurd.” Gaventa, 101. Thus, Philip’s response becomes a more striking act of obedience and faith. Williams, 164. This unusual command highlights God’s initiative and guidance. Larkin, Acts, 132.

\(^2\)Gaventa, 102.
that Jesus was the one prophesied about in Isa 53. The “good news about Jesus” that Philip explained must have been a presentation of Jesus as the fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy.

Fitzmyer summarizes, “The episode of Philip’s converting the Ethiopian eunuch presents the risen Christ above all as the Servant of the Lord who tolerated what was done to him as a silent sheep before its shearers. It emphasizes Luke’s understanding of the suffering and death of Jesus as a humiliation silently accepted: his life was taken away and justice was denied him.”

One could imagine that Philip also directed the eunuch from Isa 53 to Isa 56. There, the Lord says, “Let not foreigner who has bound himself to the LORD say, ‘the LORD will surely exclude me from his people.’ And let not any eunuch complain, ‘I am only a dry tree.’ For this is what the LORD says: ‘To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose what pleases me and hold fast to my covenant—to them I will give within my temple and its walls a memorial and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that will not be cut off’” (Isa 56:3-5).

Once the eunuch understood who Jesus was, he requested baptism. After that, he went on his way rejoicing—an emotion Luke elsewhere connects with the reception of salvation (Acts 16:34).

Cornelius and His Household

Cornelius, as introduced by Luke, seems at first an unlikely candidate for conversion. A Roman centurion, he lived in Caesarea, the center of Roman administra-

[Fitzmyer, 411.]
Jews called Caesarea “the daughter of Edom” and referred to the city as if it were not a part of Judea. As Luke continues, however, a different, more positive outlook of Cornelius comes into view. He and all his family are described as “devout and God-fearing; he gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly” (Acts 10:2). As the story progresses, more and more evidence suggests that Cornelius was indeed a good man. He received a vision from God one afternoon while he was praying, and he is described as a “righteous and God-fearing man, who is respected by all the Jewish people” (Acts 10:22). In short, he really was a good candidate for conversion.

Luke records in great detail the events surrounding Cornelius’s conversion. In this case, Peter’s message is especially important to my study, for according to the angel, it was “a message through which you and all your household will be saved” (Acts 11:14).

The major elements of this salvation message can be divided into two basic sections. First, Peter recounted the events that have “happened throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee” (Acts 10:37). Then, at the conclusion of his sermon, he moved to the message that Jesus specifically “commanded us to preach” (Acts 10:42).

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1Williams, 184.

2Luke twice mentions the time of the vision. This is important because the ninth hour, the time when Cornelius prayed, was the Jewish hour of prayer. Williams, 184. Cornelius evidently followed at least some Jewish religious practices.

3In a sense, this is a double conversion story, for, as Gaventa notes, “Luke demonstrates that the conversion of the first Gentile required the conversion of the church as well. Indeed, in Luke’s account, Peter and company undergo a change that is far more wrenching than the change experienced by Cornelius.” Gaventa, 109. It is interesting to note the time of day when Peter receives his revelation from heaven. As was the case with the eunuch and Saul, the Lord speaks to him at midday. This may suggest a linkage between these three conversion accounts.
What has happened:

1. God does not have favorites, but accepts all who fear him and do right (Acts 10:34-35).

2. God sent to Israel the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all (Acts 10:36).


5. God raised him on the third day and caused him to be seen by witnesses (Acts 10:40-41).

What Peter was commanded to preach:

1. The killed and risen one is the one God appointed to judge the living and dead (Acts 10:42).

2. All the prophets testify that “everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name” (Acts 10:43).

Peter’s message was interrupted when the Holy Spirit “came on all who heard the message” (Acts 10:44). When Peter heard them speaking in tongues and praising God, “he ordered that they be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ” (Acts 10:48).

Cornelius’s response consisted of obeying (when God revealed to him that he should send for Peter), listening (to Peter’s message), and finally obeying once again when Peter ordered that he be baptized in the name of Jesus.
Midway through Paul’s second missionary journey, he and his companions arrived in Philippi. Generally, when Paul arrived in a city he would begin to share the message of Jesus in the town’s synagogue. Apparently, Philippi did not have a large enough Jewish population to form a synagogue, so on Sabbath, Paul and his companions left the city and looked for a place of prayer along the banks of a nearby river.

They found a gathering of people, as they had hoped, and Paul sat down and began to speak. One of the women gathered there was Lydia, who was a “worshiper of God” (Acts 16:14). Luke writes that “the Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul’s message. When she and the members of her household were baptized, she invited us to her home.” Lydia persuaded Paul and his companions to remain in her household throughout their stay in Philippi (vs. 15).

Not much is known about this Lydia, the one F. F. Bruce calls Paul’s “first convert” in Europe. Yet, Luke records a number of important details about her.

First, she was from Thyatira, a city in Asia known for purple dye. It is not surprising, then, that Lydia was a dealer in purple cloth. Quality purple dye was extremely expensive, which meant that purple cloth was a luxury item reserved for the

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2Probably the Gangites River, located about 1 mile south of the city. Gaertner, 253. Rivers or other bodies of water were popular meeting places because the water could be used for ritual purification rites. Williams, 282.

3Bruce, 311.

4Ibid.

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wealthy members of society. Based upon Luke’s description, it is apparent that Lydia was a wealthy business woman and head of her household. A household referred to much more than a nuclear family. Instead, it was the basic social unit in society and included the householder’s family as well as slaves and their families. Lydia also had room for guests such as Paul and his traveling companions.

Lydia was also a “worshiper of God.” In other words, she was a God-fearer—one who was connected to Judaism and worshiped Israel’s God without a formal connection to Judaism. In short, Luke makes it clear that Lydia is a financially independent, responsible, and spiritual woman.

What was it that Lydia heard from Paul on that Sabbath day by the river? Once again, Luke does not record the details of the message. Instead, he notes the role of God by stating that “the Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul’s message” (16:14). When she accepted Paul’s message, she was baptized, along with the members of her household. This collective “household conversion” was to be expected, for, as Larkin notes, “the conversion of this female head of a household, who was either single or a

\(^1\) Larkin, Acts, 236.

\(^2\) Ibid.; Gaertner, 253; Williams, 282.

\(^3\) A household would have included “slaves, attendants, and other dependants.” Bruce, 222. A household would therefore consist of a large number of people. Larkin, Acts, 236.

\(^4\) Larkin, Acts, 236; Gaertner, 253. She may have become a God-fearer in her hometown of Thyatira, because Jews there were known to be involved in the dyeing trade there. Williams, 282-283.
widow, has necessary religious and spiritual implications for the other members."

Following her baptism, Lydia invited Paul and his companions to stay as guests at her home. For Lydia, Paul’s acceptance of her hospitality was the crucial sign that she was fully accepted as a “believer in the Lord.” By responding to her invitation, Paul and his traveling companions demonstrated that those who are fellow believers in Jesus are one—previous social or religious barriers between Jew and Gentile or male and female, for example, are no more. Witherington notes that in this conversion account, Luke has made an important point to his readers: namely, that “while Lydia could not be a founding member of a Jewish synagogue, she can be and is the founding member of the Christian community which begins to meet in her household (16:40).”

The Philippian Jailer and His Household

Just after his description of Lydia’s conversion, Luke moves on to yet another household conversion story—that of a pagan Roman jailer who also lived in Philippi.

Paul and Silas had been preaching in Philippi for some time. As they preached, they were shadowed by a young slave girl who earned money for her owners by

1Larkin, Acts, 237. Gaertner demonstrates his Western, individualistic bias when he reinterprets the passage to mean that “several members of the family besides Lydia wanted to be baptized” (254). Actually, the rest of the household would have merely followed the decision made by the head of the house. Williams notes that this would have been “as much a mark of family solidarity as of their own faith” (198, 283).


3The city of Philippi was made a Roman colony so that it could serve as a retirement community for Roman soldiers who had concluded their active service. As a colony, it had the same legal system as Italy. In addition, it was freed from taxation and tribute, except on land. Larkin, Acts, 235. It was also located on the Via Egnatia, a major trade route between Asia and the West. Williams, 281.
predicting the future. As she followed Paul and Silas, she shouted, “These men are
servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved” (Acts 16:17).
When Paul finally exorcized the spirit, the girl’s owners became furious and had Paul and
Silas thrown in prison.

During the night, a violent earthquake opened the doors of the prison and
loosened the prisoner’s chains.\(^1\) When the Roman jailer saw the prison doors ajar, he
assumed his prisoners had escaped. Roman law specified that a jailer whose prisoners
escaped was subject to the same sentence his prisoners would have received.\(^2\) Rather
than facing this humiliation, the jailer drew his sword to commit suicide. Paul interrupted
the jailer announcing that all the prisoners remained. The jailer rushed in, brought Paul
and Silas out, and asked, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” (Acts 16:30). While
“saved” can refer to physical deliverance, it is clear that the jailer had something else in
mind. “Temporal salvation is not the issue, since the prisoners are reported present;
clearly, then, this seismic event has shaken loose from the jailer’s heart the key religious
question of his age.”\(^3\) Kistemaker affirms this same point, that “his interest is in eternal
security, not job security.”\(^4\) This question from the jailer also indicates at least some

\(^1\)In Hellenistic religion, earthquakes were viewed as a divine warning. Luke
1992), 300, 303.

\(^2\)John B. Polhill, *Acts*, The New American Commentary, 26 (Nashville:
Broadman, 1992), 355; Williams, 289.


\(^4\)Simon Kistemaker, *Exposition of the Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids, MI:
Baker, 1990), 601. Newman and Nida posit that “saved” should here be understood in
theological terms, not merely as a deliverance from physical death. Barclay M. Newman
familiarity with the message preached by Paul and Silas. He had apparently heard (or heard about) the message they had been sharing in Philippi and knew enough “to ask the correct question about becoming a disciple of Christ.”

Paul and Silas responded, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household” (Acts 16:31). After hearing the word of the Lord further proclaimed, the jailer bathed the wounds of Paul and Silas, and he and his family were baptized. Finally, the jailer brought Paul and Silas into his home “and set a meal before them; he was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God—he and his whole family” (Acts 16:34). According to Larkin, “The jailer and his household are the quintessential converts.”

Once again, I wish to highlight what Paul and Silas said must be done in order to be saved: “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household” (Acts 16:31). The idea here is one of motion toward someone, in this case, Jesus. This,

United Bible Societies, 1972), 322.

1Gaertner, 258; Williams, 289-290; and Fitzmyer, 600.

2Gaertner, 259.

3In this account, Munck notes the “same dramatic speed as we encountered in the account of the Ethiopian treasurer . . . ; the jailer and everybody in his household were baptized the very same night” (162).

4Larkin, Acts, 243.

5From this statement it is not clear if Paul meant that the belief of the jailer was sufficient to bring salvation to the rest of his family or that if he believed, and if any of his family believed, those who believed would be saved. “The first of these alternatives more naturally suits the meaning of the Greek.” Newman and Nida, 322.

in very brief form, has been considered by some as a "classic" formulation of the way of salvation.¹

As with Lydia, Luke highlights the group nature of the conversion. The jailer is not saved alone, but he is saved along with the members of his household. Finally, Luke records a midnight meal that the jailer shares with Paul and Silas. This meal was more than a snack to satisfy hunger. It represented more than mere hospitality as well. The jailer's willingness to host the meal, and the willingness of Paul and Silas to eat it, demonstrated a mutual understanding that "they were brothers in Christ."²

One might wonder if such a quick conversion from paganism could be lasting. Although this question cannot be answered with certainty, it is worth noting that two minuscule manuscripts give the jailer a name: Stephanas. In 1 Cor 16:15, Paul commends the household of Stephanas as one of "the first converts in Achaia who have devoted themselves to the service of the saints." MacGregor suggests that this is "presumably the same person."³

Paul the Apostle

Of all the conversion accounts in Acts, none is better known than the account of Saul on the Damascus road. As a result of that experience, the great persecutor of the Christian church becomes its greatest missionary. Ironically, this famous account is also

¹Fitzmyer, 589.
²Polhill, 356. Kistemaker uses the same phrase, saying the meal demonstrated that Paul and Silas were considered "brothers in Christ" (602).
the most debated conversion in all of Acts. In his influential *Paul among Jews and Gentiles*, Krister Stendahl argues that the record of Saul’s “conversion” in Acts is not a conversion at all, but merely a call.¹ His view has influenced many. Johannes Munck notes, “The calling of Paul is related three times in Acts” and in his discussion of the passages, he is careful to avoid the word conversion.² Fitzmyer also refers to Saul’s Damascus road experience as “the story of the call of Saul. It is not an account of his psychological ‘conversion’ as it is often characterized.”³

In a sense, Stendahl, Munch, Fitzmyer, and others are correct in that the experience of Saul is not presented as a story of an evil man who becomes good. In fact, Saul’s zeal in persecuting the Christians is presented as a mark of his devotion to God.⁴ At the end of Acts, Paul continues to consider himself a good Jew. Yet, while Munck refuses to refer to Saul’s experience as “conversion,” he describes Paul at the time as “an unbeliever” and “a fanatic persecutor of the Christians.”⁵ Yet, three days later, this unbelieving, fanatic persecutor of Christians is a believing Christian, attempting to convert others.

Part of the problem lies in which definition of conversion one chooses. The definition employed by Fitzmyer, for example, assumes that conversion involves a bad


²Munck, 82.

³Fitzmyer, 419-420.

⁴See Phil 3:2-11, where Paul list his zeal and persecution of Christians as achievements, not as a lack of faithfulness.

⁵Munck, 82.
person becoming good. Thus, as he discusses the Damascus road experience, he writes, “It is not the conversion of a great sinner, but rather of how heaven can upset the persecution of God’s people.” If one sees conversion as the moment when a sinner becomes somehow righteous, then the Ethiopian eunuch, Lydia, and Cornelius should also be excluded from the conversion accounts of Acts, but this is something Fitzmyer does not do.²

While this is not the place to settle this issue, perhaps the best course is to refer to the Damascus road experience as a “conversion-call.”³ This is not an attempt to avoid the issue, but rather, to better describe what actually occurred.

What occurred is of obvious importance to Luke, as he includes the account three different times: Acts 9, 22, and 26. A good ancient writer was expected to tell the same story a number of ways (to repeat oneself too closely was a sign of poor writing) so it is not surprising that the three accounts are all somewhat unique.⁴ Kistemaker correctly argues, “We can explain the differences by considering their purpose, settings, and audiences. The first account reports the historical event; the second features Paul addressing a crowd of angry Jews in Jerusalem; and the third is a speech in which Paul

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¹Fitzmyer, 420.

²Ibid., 446-447.

³Ibid., 420, uses this term. While Gaventa usually describes the Damascus road experience as a “conversion,” she also notes that, especially in Acts 26, the narrative is presented as a call story. Gaventa, 90.

seeks to persuade Agrippa to become a Christian.”¹ Gaventa likewise notes that the differences in the three accounts are not the result of different sources, but rather, “derive from the demands of diverse contexts.”²

Instead of focusing on the differences, however, for the purposes of this study it is best to note the basic, recurring themes of Paul’s Damascus road experience, for, as Munck notes, “the deviations are most pronounced with regard to the course of external events, while as far as the aim of the narrative is concerned, there is more agreement.”³

First of all, Paul is presented as a pious, zealous Jew. He persecuted Christians, not because he desired to do evil, but because he desired to do good. As he looked back on his life before coming to Christ, Paul described himself as a Jew, trained in the law of the fathers, and “zealous for God” (Acts 22:3).⁴ His persecution of Christians was one of the marks of his zeal for God. Certainly, Paul would come to acknowledge that it was a misplaced zeal, but it was not an act of rebellion against God or a decision for evil. Before his conversion-call, Paul was a good, upstanding, religious man, willing to extend himself to do what he believed was God’s will (Phil 3:4-6).

Second, in all three accounts of Paul’s conversion-call, Luke draws special

¹Kistemaker, 330.
²Gaventa, 67.
³Munck, 82.
⁴Gaventa notes: “His own statements do not indicate that Paul was tormented by guilt or unhappiness in his early life. Indeed, he claims that he outstripped his peers in religious devotion” (36-37). Later, Gaventa refers to Paul as “the faithful Jew” (76).
attention to the initiative and sovereign activity of God. Jesus appears to Paul, identifies himself, tells Paul where to go in Damascus, instructs Ananias in vision to go to Paul, provides the street address for Ananias, comes to the blinded Paul in vision to foretell Ananias’s visit, as well as to reveal what Paul will suffer. When he comes to Paul, Ananias makes clear who is the source of all that had happened and all that would happen: “The Lord—Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here—has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit” (Acts 9:17). Paul’s conversion-call is all about the choice of Jesus. Paul is the Lord’s “chosen instrument” (Acts 9:15).

Paul’s part in the conversion-call was primarily that of acceptance and obedience. As he lay, blinded, on the road, he first wanted to know the identity of the one speaking to him. The answer changed his life forever. He discovered that Jesus of Nazareth was in fact the “Righteous One” (Acts 22:14). He had been wrong. His zeal for God, though genuine, was actually directed against God. Now he recognized that and accepted the correction from heaven. That an understanding of the identity of Jesus was the central issue in Paul’s conversion-call is demonstrated by the message he begins to preach immediately: that Jesus was the Son of God, the Christ (Acts 9:20, 22).

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1This is not only a Lukan emphasis, but it is evident in Paul’s letters as well. Thus, for Paul, “it is not believers who turn, but God who turns believers.” Ibid., 44.

2One of the more interesting differences between the conversion-call accounts is the different way in which Ananias is portrayed. In Acts 9, Ananias is clearly presented as a Christian, while in Acts 22, “he is described as a pious Jew and speaks mainly in Jewish phrases.” Munck, 81-82. As noted previously, the two different contexts in which the story is told help to explain these differences.

3Fitzmyer writes, “Saul is thus called to surrender his previous understanding of himself and to submit to God’s will” (421). This is something he obviously does.
Having accepted that he had been working against God, Paul now moves immediately to obedience. Paul’s second question on the road is simply, “What shall I do, Lord?” (Acts 22:10). From that point on, he does exactly what he is instructed to do. He gets up and goes into the city. While he waits, blinded for three days, he observes a total fast, abstaining from food and water, and prays (Acts 9:9, 11). When Ananias visits and prays for him, Paul’s eyesight is restored. Ananias tells Paul to get up and be baptized, which Paul immediately does.\(^1\) Clearly, Paul responds to Jesus with an open heart, a response that is indicated by his willingness to accept and follow what he is asked to do.

After his baptism, Paul was willing to eat with the very ones he had come to take as prisoners. However, Paul’s willingness to enter into table fellowship with Christians as brothers did not mean that all Christians now accepted him as a brother. Luke records that when Paul first came to Jerusalem as a follower of Jesus, “he tried to join the disciples, but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he really was a disciple” (Acts 9:26). Clearly, one’s acceptance of Jesus and by him did not necessarily mean an immediate and full acceptance into the body of believers.\(^2\)

Having reviewed these nine accounts in Luke-Acts, it is time to compare and contrast the biblical material with the ten characteristics of the evangelical gospel presentation.

\(^1\)For Fitzmyer, this marks the moment when Saul becomes a Christian. “Saul was baptized by Ananias, and thus became a Christian” (429).

\(^2\)Kistemaker draws attention to this social aspect of the Damascus road experience when he notes, “Jesus brings Paul to conversion, but Paul still has to face entrance into the Church that he came to destroy” (337).

In chapter 3 of this study, I noted ten characteristics of the traditional evangelical gospel presentation in America. These ten characteristics were then examined from the perspective of communication theory. In this chapter I note the relationship between these ten characteristics and the conversion accounts in Luke-Acts. The first step was to explore nine conversion stories. Now it is time to compare and contrast their characteristics with those of the evangelical gospel presentation.

One: The Uniformity of the Message

Even a cursory reading of these nine stories reveals that Luke does not supply a uniform, consistent salvation formula. In other words, the essential steps to life that a seeker must take, or the precise message that a seeker must know, are not consistent.

Twice Jesus was asked the identical question by a Jew: “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” If this question had only one correct answer, Jesus certainly would have provided it. But in the two cases, his response was different. Jesus accepted the lawyer’s quotation of Deut 6:5 and Lev 19:18 and said, “You have answered correctly. Do this and you will live” (Luke 10:28). To the rich ruler’s identical question, Jesus quoted from the decalogue; additionally he required him to sell all he had, give to the poor, then follow him (Acts 18:22). In the very next chapter, Zacchaeus offers only half of his possessions to the poor, yet Jesus announced, “Today salvation has come to this house” (Luke 19:9). The criminal on the cross did not quote from the law, nor was he required to

1To better highlight the contrast, I will sometimes refer to specific aspects of the Lukan conversion accounts which have already been noted.
do anything, yet Jesus promised him paradise. The eunuch was not told to give up his wealth, nor were Cornelius or Lydia. When the great missionaries Paul and Silas faced the question, “What must I do to be saved?” their answer was certainly different from that given by Jesus.

It seems obvious, then, that Luke is not interested in providing an *ordo salutis* for his readers to follow. In different situations, at different times, to different audiences, different ways of salvation are expressed. In spite of this wide diversity, some scholars still seem intent on harmonizing these accounts to somehow create a series of consistent steps one must go through in order to experience salvation. Black, for example, provides a rather helpful look at the various accounts of conversions in Acts, but then concludes, “Luke’s stories do portray a rather uniform picture of conversion.” Black argues, “For Luke, the uniform process of Christian conversion is to believe, repent and be baptized.”¹

Gaventa disagrees. In her book on conversion in the New Testament, she stresses that “no conversion, not even that of the crowd at Pentecost, establishes a pattern that is followed by later believers or is appealed to in preaching.”² In short, Luke does not provide us with a “salvation formula.” It is not possible, then, to define the essential, irrefutable, unchanging supracultural steps one must take to be saved. Bill Bright’s concept of a “transferrable concept” does not play out, at least not in Luke-Acts. This means that each person may need to “do” or “believe” something somewhat unique in order to be saved.

¹R. Black, 87.
²Gaventa, 124.
Instead of a uniform presentation, we find the way of salvation described in a manner that meshes with the existing knowledge base of the seeker, i.e., what one must do to be saved is not an entirely new message. Since this is a crucial, though perhaps not readily recognized, concept, I substantiate this assertion with a quick review of each of these nine pericopes in Luke-Acts.

In the Gospel of Luke, each individual seeker of salvation was a Jew. In each case, there is a connection made between salvation and the Jewish source of authority: the Old Testament. When the lawyer questions, Jesus directs him to the law and asks, “How do you read it?” (Luke 10:26). Likewise, when the rich ruler questions him, Jesus begins by turning to the law. Zacchaeus’s announcement that he repaid four times over any amount that he had falsely taken showed both a knowledge of and obedience to “the most demanding penalty of the law.” Jesus’ declaration of salvation was “because this man, too, is a son of Abraham.” Finally, Jesus’ promise to remember the crucified criminal was based upon the criminal’s explicit request for royal clemency, which only the Messianic King could provide.

In Acts, the fact that the message of salvation was based upon the existing knowledge of the seeker is evident as well. The eunuch was a worshiper of God and was reading from Isaiah. Philip did not begin to explain Jesus based upon some prepackaged set of texts, but he began with the very passage the eunuch was reading. Cornelius not only worshiped God, but he also observed at least some Jewish traditions, such as the set times for prayer. In his message of salvation Peter reminded Cornelius and his household

\footnote{See Exod 22:1; Bock, *Luke* 9, 1513.}
of what they already knew. He said, “You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, telling the good news of peace through Jesus Christ. . . . You know what has happened throughout Judea” (Acts 10:36-37). Cornelius, then, had quite extensive knowledge even before Peter opened his mouth to speak, and Peter capitalized on that knowledge.

Although it is not so obvious, evidence suggests that this was also the case in the story of the Philippian jailer. Luke informs his readers that Paul and Silas had been preaching the way of salvation in Philippi for some time. In fact, the very reason they are in jail is because Paul has exorcised a spirit from a girl who followed them, shouting that Paul and Silas were telling the Philippians “the way to be saved” (Acts 16:17).

The jailer probably knew about his new prisoners and had heard reports of Paul’s teaching as well.¹ It is no wonder that he asked, “What must I do to be saved?” (Acts 16:30). The answer he received must have echoed what he had heard previously. Now, however, he listened with an open heart.

In all of these cases we see that as Jesus and the apostles spoke of salvation, they began on familiar, even expected territory. They carefully established common ground with their listeners before they broke new ground. In other words, the message of salvation had a “familiar ring” to it, not because it was a uniform message, but because it was specifically targeted to the audience.

Two: The Resistance to Change

This second characteristic of the gospel presentation is closely related to the first

¹Williams, 289-290.
characteristic. In North America, evangelicals have employed an essentially uniform “plan of salvation,” and the uniform message is one that was originally crafted in the 1950s and 60s. We do not find this aged, static way of salvation presented in Luke-Acts. Instead, as already noted, the message appears to be crafted to meet the immediate situation and individual being addressed. The message presented did not require explanation because of its age; rather, it addressed and answered a current situation or problem.

Three: The Focus on the Individual

In contrast to the North American gospel presentation, the conversion stories in Luke and Acts are often corporate instead of individualistic. In only three of the nine cases (the criminal on the cross, the eunuch, and the apostle Paul) is an individual “saved” as a single individual. In all other cases, the convert comes to salvation as the head of a household, and his or her reception of salvation brings salvation to their entire household.

To Zacchaeus, Jesus said, “I must stay at your house today” (Luke 19:5). Then, Jesus announced, “Today, salvation has come to this house because this man, too, is a son of Abraham” (Acts 19:9). In the case of Cornelius, Luke notes that the “holy angel” directed Peter to enter the house of Cornelius (Acts 10:22) and present the message which would save him and all his household (Acts 11:14). In Philippi, Lydia received God’s message, but “she and the members of her household were baptized” (Acts 16:15). For

1This concept is further explored in the section, “Nature of the Required Response.”
the jailer, the same pattern is discernable. When he asks what he must do to be saved, Paul and Silas inform him that if he believes in the Lord Jesus, "you will be saved—you and your household" (Acts 16:31). In each of these cases, the reception of salvation by an individual results in the salvation of a social unit, the household. Salvation comes corporately to a group rather than to one person in isolation.¹

This Lukan emphasis on household evangelism does not first appear in Acts, however. In Luke 10, Jesus himself instructs the Seventy-two to follow the pattern of household evangelism. In his instructions, Jesus says, "When you enter a house, first say, "Peace to this house" (Luke 10:5). Matson notes: "In Lukan terms, 'peace' is a metaphor for salvation."² In light of Luke's apparent interest in household conversions, it is not surprising that the only household conversion in the Synoptics is the story of Zacchaeus, recorded only by Luke. Matson notes:

The story of Zacchaeus furnished the only synoptic account of a conversion of a household. Its strategic placement in Luke suggests that the narrator regards this story as the climactic fulfillment of Jesus' journey to Jerusalem. A mission that begins with the sending of the Seventy-two to the houses and cities of Israel (10.1-16) concludes with Jesus' conversion of a household in the city of Jericho (19.1-10). Like the messengers whom he himself sends, Jesus converts a household by entering and staying in the house of a proto-typical Gentile. Though the poetic sequence of these actions varies, the Zacchaeus account succeeds in showing how Jesus enacts his own pattern of mission to households.³

The household conversion stories in Acts, then, should not be a surprise. They merely record Jesus' disciples following the pattern he taught and modeled. The

¹For a fuller treatment of this issue, see Matson.

²Matson, 45.

³Ibid., 75.
corporate nature of these conversions is easily overlooked by Western commentators.¹

Four: The Assumption of Certain Audience
Attitudes and Beliefs

The evangelical gospel presentation assumes a uniform audience that has a Christian background and thus understands certain key terms in traditional Christian ways. As noted previously, this is no longer the case in America. The American audience does not all hold the attitudes and beliefs that many evangelicals assume. As a result, the gospel presentation loses effectiveness and impact. Because the message of salvation in Luke-Acts is especially tailored for the target audience, this problem of incorrect assumptions (and thus poor communication) is resolved.

Five: The Promise of the Good Life

The reception of salvation in the North American gospel presentation comes with the promise that one will now enter into the good life. Salvation brings peace, success, and a wonderful life. In Luke, the gospel is indeed good news, and reception of salvation does bring joy.

At the same time, Lukan conversion accounts do not imply that being saved will suddenly exempt one from the struggle and pain of daily life. The criminal on the cross is promised paradise, but he is still crucified. The eunuch, Cornelius, Lydia, and the jailer would all face considerable challenges, including perhaps ridicule and even unemployment as a result of their conversions. For Luke, the acceptance of salvation brings joy,

¹Witherup, for example, refers to the accounts of Cornelius, Lydia, and the Jailer as individual conversion stories (63).
but does not bring the guarantee of a pleasant, more peaceful life. Instead, it may carry with it challenging and perhaps unpleasant responsibilities. This is perhaps most clearly demonstrated in the case of the rich ruler who, Jesus said, needed to sell all he had and give to the poor.

The challenge presented by the future is evident in other stories as well. The expert in the law is told to love God and his neighbor, but Jesus then tells the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37). For the lawyer, the call to do as the Samaritan did would have been offensive, both racially and religiously. Finally, as Saul lay blinded in Damascus, the Lord informs Ananias, “I will show him how much he must suffer for my name” (Acts 9:16). For Paul, accepting Jesus as Lord would lead to suffering, not necessarily “the abundant life.” In the same chapter that relates Paul’s conversion story, the reader of Acts discovers that fellow Jews conspire to kill Paul, who has to escape by night in a basket through an opening in the wall. When Paul arrives in Jerusalem, his fellow Christians are afraid of him. Clearly, conversion does not mean the road ahead becomes easier. It involves change and challenge, suffering and danger.

It is not merely the conversion stories that speak to this issue, but also Luke-Acts as a whole. I. Howard Marshall notes:

Luke’s gospel testifies to both the present blessedness of the disciples and also the sufferings, persecution and deprivation which they would suffer. So too in Acts the disciples are told “through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God” (Acts 14:23). Paul knew that in every city imprisonment and afflictions awaited him (Acts 20:23; cf. 9:16). What is here stated in general terms as a possibility is shown to be stark reality by the narrative. Stephen perishes by stoning as a martyr. James is put to death with the sword. Peter is put in prison and is fortunate to escape with his life. From the outset the Jewish leaders persecute the church in Jerusalem, and after Stephen’s death the pace quickens, so that many of the Christians have to flee elsewhere. When the story of Paul’s missionary work is taken up, opposition and persecution continually face him and
his converts, culminating in his arrest in Jerusalem, his subsequent imprisonment, and his journey as a captive to Rome. Paul himself lives under the threat of death, and is ready to meet his end when it comes (Acts 20:24; 21:13). Here is not the account of a church which already lives in a state of heavenly glory or whose mission is uninterrupted by difficulty.1

After noting that trouble came from within the church as well, Marshall summarizes, “There is, therefore, trouble in plenty.”2 This reality is conveniently ignored by the evangelical gospel presentation.

Six: The Emphasis on Knowledge and Information

In the North American gospel presentation, the one who seeks salvation is given a logical, sequential presentation of information. One comes to understand and know a series of facts or laws which are said to come from the Bible. Salvation comes when one comes to know certain things. Then, the seeker is called to make a logical decision based on the information presented.

In Luke-Acts, the way of salvation is not presented as a uniform set of logical steps that resemble a mathematical equation. Perhaps more specifically, salvation does not come merely as a result of knowing new information. For example, in the case of the expert in the law who asked Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life, Jesus merely called him to follow the information he already knew. It was not a lack of knowledge that would have kept the lawyer from salvation, but a failure to act on what he already knew. In the case of the criminal on the cross, no explicit salvation message is even delivered.

2Ibid., 211.
He requests salvation and it is granted. Peter’s preaching to Cornelius was essentially a review of what Cornelius already knew, rather than a presentation of new information that Cornelius needed before he could respond appropriately. For Paul, a single fact was central in his conversion-call: that Jesus (with whom he already was familiar) was in fact the Messiah.

Finally, the traditional evangelical gospel presentation discourages the experience of emotion and instead encourages a decision based on fact. The cases in Luke-Acts are different in that they are characterized by divine manifestations, emotional situations, and mysterious events. Zacchaeus, the criminal on the cross, the eunuch, Cornelius, the Jailer, and Paul would have found it odd to have been told that they should not expect to feel anything. Each of their conversions was a mysterious blend of divine initiative and charged emotions: blinding light and a voice from heaven, an angelic appearance in the home, and an earthquake that literally cracks open a jail. In Luke-Acts, recipients of salvation responded to awesome events orchestrated by God. It does not appear that they were compelled to respond based upon the logic of the presentation.

Seven: The Call for an Abstract Response

According to the North American gospel presentation, one who wishes to be saved should respond to the gospel message, but this response is abstract and passive. The seeker of salvation is expected to respond internally and intellectually. Most frequently, seekers are called upon to “receive Christ,” “believe,” and “trust.” The one, more active response expected by all three presentations is that the seeker is called to pray. However, this prayer is essentially an affirmation that one agrees to the
propositions, and it need not even be spoken out loud.

In Luke-Acts, this same pattern of response is not found. Instead of mental assent to the facts of the gospel, seekers of salvation are called to real, concrete actions. For example, the lawyer is expected to love others as himself. This love is illustrated by the parable of the good Samaritan, who cares for a wounded Jew by dressing his wounds and paying for his continued care in an inn. The rich ruler is told to obey the commandments as well as sell all he has, give to the poor, and follow Jesus. In the case of Zacchaeus, Luke does not record what Jesus may have said to Zacchaeus, but only what Zacchaeus did prior to Jesus' announcement of salvation: Zacchaeus climbed a tree, welcomed Jesus into his home, gave half of his possessions to the poor, and paid back four times any amount he had taken falsely. Cornelius's angelic vision, which led to salvation, came because God remembered his prayers and gifts to the poor; Cornelius responded by sending men to find Peter—in other words, his actions were a key factor in his conversion. In all these cases, the seeker of salvation was expected to do more than affirm, trust, believe, or merely receive. Certainly they did trust, believe, and receive, but a more active response was necessary as well.

Interestingly, this active response was not prayer. In only two conversion accounts is prayer even mentioned (that of Cornelius and Paul) and in neither of these cases is the moment of prayer the moment of reception of salvation.

Thus, while Luke does not always seem interested in the details of what is required for salvation, it is clear that the response often involved something more than mental assent to the facts of salvation. Instead of prayer, Luke records two actions which are repeatedly connected with the reception of salvation. First, those who seek salvation
are baptized. Baptism was not an absolute necessity for salvation (as in the cases of Zacchaeus and the criminal on the cross), but it does appear to be the expected rite for one who has received salvation (as was the case for the eunuch, Cornelius, Lydia, the jailer, and Paul). It is also interesting that the request for baptism could be initiated by either the convert or the messenger. The eunuch requested baptism, but Peter commanded that Cornelius’s household be baptized; Cornelius merely obeyed Peter’s command. The second action associated with the reception of salvation in Luke-Acts was the sharing of table-fellowship. The idea of sharing a meal as an important symbol of entrance into the Christian faith may come as a shock to Western Christians. Part of the reason for this reaction is that the North American presentation of the gospel emphasizes the vertical nature of salvation. In other words, salvation is said to come when the vertical relationship between God and humanity is restored. Receiving Christ, however, bridges the gulf, and the relationship between God and the individual is restored. Little or nothing is said about the restoration of horizontal relationships.

Hans Kasdorf’s view illustrates this evangelical emphasis: “The primary human problem is neither social nor physical, but spiritual and moral. Sin has separated, alienated, and estranged us from God. . . . In the conversion process sin is forgiven, the gulf of separation bridged, a new relationship established, and life transformed.”

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1As has already been noted, each presentation includes expectations or “suggestions” for the new convert’s future. Even as the new convert is urged to attend church and witness to others, baptism is never suggested as a possibility in any of the dominant gospel presentations.

Kasdorf, sinners are estranged from God, and this vertical relationship is what conversion restores. While this view is widely accepted and promulgated, it is not an articulation of a Lukan emphasis. Instead of focusing solely on the restoration of a vertical relationship, Luke also stresses that salvation brings a restoration of relationship with other people.¹

In order to see this clearly, “sin” must be understood in Luke’s context. Certainly, sin “is a violation of God’s norms.”² In Luke’s world, however, sin had an additional, perhaps even more dominant connotation. To be a sinner meant that one was not accepted as a part of established society. Joel Green explains that “‘sinner’ receives concrete explication especially in terms of group definition; a ‘sinner’ is an outsider.”³ Thus, a leper, a bleeding woman, and a tax collector were all considered as sinners, even though they may not have been known reprobates. While one’s initial alienation from society may have been because of a perceived “spiritual” sin, the label “sinner” and the subsequent alienation remained even if “spiritual” sin was no longer evident.

For Jesus to receive sinners was to say that he received the marginalized as much as that he received the immoral. Forgiveness of sin, then, was to remove whatever it was that acted as a barrier and “excluded one from one’s community.”⁴ Likewise, to be saved was to move from alienation to belonging, both in vertical and horizontal relationships.

¹Witherup, 53.
²Kasdorf, 60.
⁴Ibid., 79.
In Luke-Acts, then, salvation involves much more than the restoration of one’s relationship with God.¹ Gaventa notes that, biblically, conversion “involves the whole person and not merely one’s moral sense, intellectual capacity, or spiritual life. Body, mind, and soul together are affected by the action of conversion, and implications are felt in all aspects of one’s life, including the social and political arenas.”²

The sharing of table-fellowship deals with this horizontal, social dimension of salvation and is an important and recurring theme in Lukan conversion stories.³ The place of table-fellowship in evangelism was introduced by Jesus as he sent out the Seventy-two on their missionary journey. He gave explicit direction that his followers should share in table-fellowship with those they were attempting to reach, saying, “Stay in that house, eating and drinking whatever they give you... When you enter a town and are welcomed, eat what is set before you” (Luke 10:7-8).

This charge was not too difficult to follow as long as the disciples were working among Jews. However, when the mission of the church extended into the Gentile world, Jesus’ charge was a challenge. Philip Esler notes that, “although Jews were happy to mix with Gentiles in synagogues or possibly even in market-places or streets, eating with them was a very different matter.... The antipathy of Jews towards table-fellowship with Gentiles, in the full sense of sitting around a table with them and sharing the same food,

¹Bosch suggests that for Luke, salvation has six dimensions: economic, social, political, physical, psychological, and spiritual (117).

²Gaventa, 7.

wine and vessels, was an intrinsic feature of Jewish life for centuries before and after our period. To eat together was a symbol of intimacy and acceptance which carried religious connotations. This was something Jews were not willing to do with Gentiles or Jewish “sinners,” because to eat with such a person was tantamount to admitting social and religious equality with them.

With this in mind, the role of table-fellowship in Luke’s conversion stories is most interesting. In the cases of the criminal on the cross and the eunuch, table-fellowship was not physically possible because of the situation surrounding the conversion. In each of the other conversion stories, however, table-fellowship is a part of the conversion process.

Jesus went to the home of Zacchaeus and accepted his hospitality, which would have included the sharing of food. This led to the grumbling of the watching Jews, who saw that Jesus had gone to be the guest of a sinner. The underlying tension in the Cornelius story arises, not because Cornelius is a Gentile who is baptized, but because Peter enters his house and eats with him. This became explicit when Peter returned to Jerusalem and was criticized by the brothers there, not because he had baptized the

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2Ibid., 72. See also Joachim Jeremias, New Testament Theology, trans. John Bowden (New York: Scribner, 1971), 114-121. According to Jeremias, eating together was “an offer of peace, trust, brotherhood and forgiveness; in short, sharing a table meant sharing life” (115).

3Witherup correctly notes that Gentile conversions were “both a cause for great joy to the Christian community and a problem” (60).
Gentile, Cornelius, but because, in the words of the believers, "You went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them" (Acts 11:2). For Lydia, the test of whether or not she had been accepted as a believer in the Lord centered on Paul’s willingness to stay in her household and accept her hospitality.

The crucial place of table-fellowship is again evident in the conversion of the heathen jailer in Philippi. When he and his household heard the message of salvation, they were baptized. Then, while it was still night, the jailer “brought them into his house and set a meal before them” (Acts 16:34). Finally, in the case of Paul’s conversion, we find the mention of table-fellowship once again. When Ananias came and restored his sight, Luke records that Paul got up, was baptized, and took food. For a Pharisee (which Paul was), the table was viewed as an altar. For Paul to eat, then, in the presence of those he had come to arrest for apostasy, was a powerful sign of his change of perspective.

In each of these stories, the act of sharing a meal with the messenger of salvation was a rite which signaled the new believers’ full acceptance into a new community. Their vertical relationship with God changed, but perhaps of equal importance was the fact that they were welcomed and accepted as full-fledged members of a new community. They were saved into a new community where gender, ethnicity, or status as Jew or Gentile

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1Esler sarcastically notes that “this aspect of the incident is usually submerged in sweeping statements that the Cornelius account is intended to pave the way for ‘the mission to the Gentiles’, a catch-phrase beloved of writers on Luke and apparently expressive of his deepest intentions in the work” (71).

2Because Pharisees viewed the table as an altar, they were careful to ensure that they and their table companions were ritually clean. Jones, 169.
was shown to be insignificant enough that all could eat together.

Unfortunately, the importance of table-fellowship in the Lukan conversion stories is often overlooked by Western readers for whom the act of eating is seen primarily as a biological necessity that may bring some personal pleasure as well. According to Esler, the failure to note the importance of table-fellowship between Jews and Gentiles “is one of the most outstanding deficiencies in Lucan scholarship.”

In Luke and Acts, it is clear that conversion “brings one into a new relationship with God and with other human beings.” It should also not come as a surprise that Luke’s dominant image of heaven is a place where “people will come from the east and west and north and south, and will take their places at the feast in the kingdom of God. Indeed, there are those who are last who will be first, and the first who will be last” (Luke 13:29-30).

Bosch summarizes nicely: “The Jesus Luke introduces to his readers is somebody who brings the outsider, the stranger, and the enemy home and gives him and her, to the chagrin of the ‘righteous’, a place of honor at the banquet in the reign of God.”

Eight: The Supposition of Separation Between God and Humanity

In the North American gospel presentation, God and humanity are consistently

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1Esler, 71.

2Witherup, 108.


4Bosch, 108.
depicted as separated by human sin. This separation is used as a motivating factor for the unsaved: They are far away from God because of their sin, and he cannot come close until they receive Christ.

This dominant image is directly contradicted by the conversion accounts in Luke-Acts. Luke makes a consistent point to highlight the preconversion piety and religiosity of those who are converted. Luke actually emphasizes the potential converts' personal piety.\textsuperscript{1} Black summarizes, “Generally, Luke does not tap into the common (even today) custom of emphasizing the wretchedness of the convert prior to conversion. Most of Luke’s preconversion characterizations show why these individuals were good candidates for conversion.”\textsuperscript{2}

Rather than stressing their sin and separation from God, Luke presents potential converts as good people who already enjoy a measure of God’s favor. For example, Zacchaeus is a good man who is misjudged by his community. The criminal on the cross does not mock Jesus, but fears God, acknowledges his guilt, and calls out to Jesus who, he believes, is capable of granting royal clemency. The eunuch worships God in Jerusalem and is searching the Scriptures. Cornelius prays, gives to the poor, and is well respected as a godly man. Lydia is a God-fearer who can be found at the place of prayer on the Sabbath. The jailer’s religiosity is not stressed, but he is a man of honor who is willing to bear the responsibility for his escaped prisoners. Finally, Paul is described as a man who is zealous for the cause of God.

\textsuperscript{1} R. Black, 59-62.

\textsuperscript{2} Ibid., 66.
Converts are not presented as individuals who are alienated and hopelessly separated from God because of sin. Luke makes this point clear in Acts 17:27-28, where he records Paul’s words to the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers in Athens: God is “not far from each one of us. ‘For in him we live and move and have our being.’”

This Lukan emphasis stands in stark contrast to the gospel presentation in America, which chooses to quote from Isa 59:2, “But your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear.” Instead, Luke shows a God who is near and actively seeking people to save. As Kasdorf notes, God is shown to be “the Originator and Initiator of the conversion act and process.” He does so through visions, dreams, and earthquakes. The question is not whether God will draw near to humanity, but rather, whether humanity will accept the seeking God.

Nine: The Presentation of the Cross as the Salvific Event

In contemporary evangelical Christianity, Jesus is most commonly pictured on a cross. His sacrifice is the payment for human sin to satisfy a holy God. Jesus’ crucifixion is thus perceived as the primary salvific event by most Western Christians. One might assume that Lukan salvation stories (especially those occurring after the crucifixion) would also focus on Jesus and his cross as the place where sins were atoned for and forgiveness and salvation offered. Once again, a careful reading of Luke-Acts demonstrates a different emphasis.

As already noted, the theme of God’s nearness and his role as initiator of salvation

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1Kasdorf, 57.
is central to Luke-Acts. It has been rightly recognized that for Luke, salvation is more theocentric than christocentric.¹ In the very first chapter of Luke, Mary rejoices in “God my Savior” (Luke 1:47), and this focus on God as the active agent in salvation remains throughout Luke-Acts. This theocentrism is further illustrated in the kerygma in Acts.

Western Christians might expect that when Peter addresses the crowd at Pentecost he would emphasize the saving role of Jesus in the plan of salvation. Instead, there is a repeated, emphatic emphasis on God as the initiator. According to Peter in Acts 2, God accredits Jesus, God raises Jesus (who is called God’s “Holy One”), God exalts Jesus, and God makes Jesus Lord and Christ.

Likewise, in his message to Cornelius, Peter emphasizes that God accepts all men, God sends the good news through Jesus, God anoints Jesus, God is with Jesus, God raises Jesus, God causes Jesus to be seen, and God appoints Jesus as Judge over all. The message of salvation certainly does not exclude Jesus, or even reduce him; it is primarily a message of what God has done. He is the central figure. Even the act of believing in Jesus was really a recognition of God’s role in salvation. Hence, Luke tells us that the household of Cornelius responds to the message of salvation by “praising God” (Acts 10:46). The same was true with the Philippian jailer, who accepted Paul’s message, believed in the Lord Jesus, and “was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God” (Acts 16:34).

There is a tendency in Western Christianity to overlook this Lukan theocentrism

in favor of a more "Jesus-centered" message. Lloyd J. Olgilvie demonstrates this in his commentary on Peter’s message to Cornelius. He devotes an entire page to discussing the content of Peter’s sermon, but never once even uses the word “God.” The speech is summarized as a message about “who Christ is” and “what he did,” when actually, the sermon is all about God and what he has done through Jesus.²

Not only is salvation in Luke theocentric, scholars have also noted that when Luke talks about Jesus’ role in salvation, he does not focus on the cross as the primary salvific event. Peter Doble correctly states that Luke essentially “avoided vicarial and atonement language.”³ Since there is an almost complete absence “of any explicitly redemptive interpretation of the death of Christ”⁴ in Luke-Acts, how does Luke’s Jesus “save”? Joel Green answers succinctly: “Jesus’ exaltation (i.e. his resurrection, but perhaps also his ascension) is for Luke the preeminent salvific event.”⁵ I. Howard Marshall repeatedly stresses this same point. He asserts that it is not the cross, but “the exaltation of Jesus” which “is the central point in the preaching in Acts.”⁶ Marshall continues, “The clear view expressed in Acts is that Jesus saves men by virtue of his


²According to Luke 7:16, people recognized that, in Jesus, “God has come to help his people.”


⁵J. Green, 125.

⁶Marshall, 165.
exaltation." The message that God raised up and exalted Jesus then "constitutes the essential core of the Christian message."  

In Luke’s mind, then, the primary picture of Jesus is not that of a vicarious blood sacrifice on a Roman cross, but of a king "exalted to the right hand of God" (Acts 2:33). Thus, when the criminal on the cross appeals to Jesus, he does not approach Jesus as a substitute sacrifice, but as the Messianic king who is able to grant royal clemency. In his account of the eunuch’s conversion, Luke quotes from Isa 53, but Bruce astutely notes that the section of Isa 53 which Luke quotes "does not indeed include any of the explicit statements of vicarious suffering found elsewhere in the fourth Servant Song. . . . If we pay attention only to the clauses that Luke reproduces it would be difficult to deduce from them anything but a theology of suffering." This pattern continues when Peter addresses the household of Cornelius. According to Peter, the message Jesus commanded the apostles to preach was that “he is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead. All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name” (Acts 10:42-43).

Again, this salvation message carries a different focus than that of the contemporary evangelical gospel message. Rather than a message about Jesus’ death which brings forgiveness, it is a message about a murdered Jesus who is raised to life,

1Ibid., 169.


3Bruce, 176.
appointed by God as judge, and who grants forgiveness, not through his death, but “through his name” (Acts 10:43).

This mention of the “name” of Jesus is common to Luke. In Acts 2, Peter highlights Jesus’ exalted position and tells his listeners they must be baptized “in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of . . . sins” (2:38). After the Damascus road experience, Jesus reveals to Paul “how much he must suffer for my name” (Acts 9:16). The believers are described as “all who call on your name” (Acts 14).

It is crucial to recognize that this mention of Jesus’ name symbolized something more than the verbalization of the word “Jesus.” In Luke’s time, to invoke or confess a person’s name was to refer to “the power and authority of the person.”\(^1\) Thus, when Jesus’ name was invoked, it was done so precisely because of the fact that he was exalted and his name carried the power of a king at the hand of God.

This exaltation of Jesus is further evidenced by the title “Lord.” Luke uses Lord as a “post-resurrection title.”\(^2\) At Pentecost, Jesus is proclaimed as “both Lord and Christ” (Acts 2:36). To Cornelius, Jesus is “Lord of all” (Acts 10:36), and in Acts 16:31, it is the “Lord Jesus” who the Philippian jailer must believe in. With the use of the title “Lord,” Luke is stressing Jesus’ resurrection and now exalted position.

The designation of Jesus as Lord points not only to his resurrection and exaltation, but also to his divinity.\(^3\) In the Old Testament, Yahweh as Lord is the one with the

\(^1\) Williams, 57. See also Marshall, 170.

\(^2\) Moule, “The Christology of Acts,” 160-161. Although Jesus is Lord prior to his resurrection, he is fully recognized as Lord after the resurrection. Dupont, 71; see also Marshall, 167.

\(^3\) Peterson, 524.
prerogative to forgive sin.\textsuperscript{1} Thus, when Jesus is exalted as Lord, he has the status necessary to forgive sin.\textsuperscript{2} In Luke, forgiveness (and thus salvation) could come, not primarily because Jesus died, but because Jesus now reigned.

At this time, a word of caution is perhaps needed. My emphasis on the Lukan presentation of the risen and exalted Christ is not intended to negate the value or efficacy of the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. Rather, it is an attempt to demonstrate that within the New Testament itself, the cross is not the one and only event which speaks to the issue of salvation.

In summary, Luke pictures salvation as initiated and directed by God, who brings salvation through Jesus. Jesus not only brings salvation, he is salvation, for to receive Jesus is to receive salvation (as in the case of Zacchaeus). Jesus faithfully does the task laid out for him by his father, and yet is killed. But God raises Jesus, exalts him as Lord and King. As exalted king, Jesus has the authority to forgive sin and, thus, to save. When one acknowledges him as King, one does not beg for forgiveness but, rather, joyfully receives it. The gospel message was the declaration, not of the power of Caesar, but the reign of "another king, one called Jesus" (Acts 17:7).

Ten: The Use of the Bible as an Authority

The typical evangelical gospel presentation in North America frequently quotes passages from the Bible, especially from the New Testament.\textsuperscript{3} More specifically, the

\textsuperscript{1}See, for example, Jer 31:34.

\textsuperscript{2}Marshall, 169.

\textsuperscript{3}In the three dominant gospel presentations, thirty-two of the thirty-eight citations come from the New Testament.
quotations are overwhelmingly either from the writings of Paul or John.¹

Obviously, Luke did not have the opportunity to quote from the writings of either Paul or John. Yet, his limited use of Scripture in the conversion accounts is instructive. Of the nine accounts explored, only three contain clear references to Scripture (the lawyer, the rich ruler, and the eunuch), and none of the passages quoted in these accounts finds its way into the dominant North American presentation. Rather than relying upon the Old Testament as a source of authority, Luke instead emphasizes the importance of the communicator as a witness. The words spoken to a seeker have authority because they come from someone who has witnessed God’s mighty acts in the person of Jesus.

Summary

The differences between the features of the evangelical gospel presentation and the presentation of the gospel in the conversion accounts in Luke-Acts are notable. Specifically: (1) Luke does not provide a systematized plan of salvation to be used with all spiritual seekers, but rather, shows flexibility based upon the specific situation of the seeker; (2) the message given is, therefore, fresh and contemporary; (3) salvation is often received corporately and involves incorporation into a new community; (4) the seeker is expected to respond with action, not mere intellectual assent to the facts of the gospel; (5) receiving salvation does not mean one will experience a life devoid of trials, but rather, one will find meaning even in suffering; (6) God is shown to be very near and active.

¹Of the thirty-two New Testament quotations, sixteen were Pauline and thirteen Johannine.
even prior to the explicit act of receiving salvation; (7) the salvific event is the resurrection and exaltation of Jesus to the right hand of the Father in heaven—it is on account of his power that Jesus can forgive; (8) Jesus and the apostles seldom quoted from their Scriptures in the presentation of the gospel; and (9) baptism and table-fellowship were frequently mentioned as rites of initiation for new members of the believing community.

These characteristics of the conversion accounts in Luke-Acts reveal that the evangelical gospel presentation is not the only way to approach Americans today. In fact, I would suggest that Christian communicators should pay more attention to what Luke had to say, and considerably less to what Kennedy, Bright, and Graham have said. This will open up possibilities for communicating the gospel with greater clarity and impact to Americans today.
CHAPTER 7

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary and Conclusions

At the start of this study, I noted that evangelicals have recognized that American society is changing. A variety of evangelical authors have suggested that the church update its methods so that the gospel message will appear more attractive to contemporary Americans.¹

My suggestion is that evangelicals must do more than contemporize evangelistic methods. They must also evaluate the gospel message itself. Specifically, I reviewed the plan of salvation in its dominant form in evangelical circles, presented by D. James Kennedy, Bill Bright, and Billy Graham. I demonstrated that this gospel formula has been widely adopted by evangelicals as the way of expressing the essential steps one must take in order to be saved.

The major portion of my study involved a two-stage critique of this dominant evangelical gospel presentation. In the first, it was noted that the continued use of the

¹As I noted in chapter 1, others have expressed dissatisfaction with the current status of the evangelical gospel presentation. My contribution, however, does not consist of merely joining in this dissatisfaction. Rather, my contribution is in using communication theory and biblical material as evaluative tools which both critique what has been done as well as provide resources for new directions in evangelistic communication.
dominant gospel presentation ignores the insight and guidance provided by communication theory. In particular, the dominant gospel presentation fails to consider and adequately understand the American audience it attempts to reach. In short, it does not communicate with maximum effectiveness. In the second, a study of Luke and Acts illustrated that the evangelical gospel presentation exhibits characteristics that are quite different from, and in some cases, contradictory to the characteristics of the way of salvation depicted in the conversion stories in those books.

In this final chapter, I make practical suggestions to Christian communicators who would wish to present the way of salvation with more impact in America today. My hope is that my suggestions would inspire and guide Christian communicators as they respond to those who genuinely seek salvation. I also hope that Americans will listen and respond to this gospel which is truly, completely good.

Recommendations for Gospel Presentations

In presenting alternate ways of making a gospel presentation, I am striving to avoid the popular tendency to critique and call for change without providing any specific, concrete suggestions as to how something might be done better. At the same time, I wish to avoid the opposite error, that of criticizing what has been done and then presenting one's own simplistic suggestion as the final and perfect solution. This second trap is especially dangerous in that one of the weaknesses of the gospel presentation in North America is that it has become a formulaic message given to everyone. It has become a "one size fits all" communication. So, in suggesting alternative salvation messages, my intent is not to do away with the presentations of Kennedy, Bright, and Graham. Their
presentations have been a valuable witnessing resource and have had a positive effect upon millions of Americans. Rather, I wish to demonstrate how a Christian might attempt to sensitively and clearly respond to a seeker who wants to enter into life. I intend to provide guides, not rules; illustrations, not scripts.

I proceed in three basic steps. First, I present the presuppositions and basic methodology that should undergird the presentation of salvation in North America today. Next, I focus on the message itself and suggest a number of content themes that should be addressed in the presentation. Finally, I move to a more specific application of these principles by providing several examples of gospel presentations geared for spiritual seekers today. For the purposes of clarity and emphasis, each step involves revisiting material which has already been established.

Presuppositional and Methodological Foundations

The Need for Gospel Presentations

America is a mission field. Some may view America as a Christian nation, no longer in need of additional evangelistic messages. The fact, however, is that Americans need to hear the gospel. While most Americans claim to be Christians, closer inspection reveals that a minority have made a personal commitment to Jesus that remains meaningful in their life today. According to Barna’s research, approximately 60 percent

\(^1\)This point must be emphasized. On the surface, this dissertation may appear critical of Kennedy, Bright, and Graham. Actually, these three men deserve admiration and respect for their tireless efforts to communicate the gospel clearly. This critique is designed to encourage others to follow their example and create new presentations rather than merely using what has already been produced.
of Americans fall into this category.¹ That means over 170 million people in North America have yet to commit themselves to God.² Christians need to be prepared to articulate a clear, effective, biblically sound message about how one makes such a commitment.

**The Receptivity of Americans**

Americans are spiritually open. Certainly, there are some who see Americans as a secular and godless people, steeped in sin and resistant to all things spiritual. The idea that America is a “secular” nation, however, is not borne out by Americans themselves. A full 60 percent say religion is “very important” in their life, with another 27 percent saying it is “fairly important.”³ When given a choice, 54 percent of Americans choose to describe themselves as “religious,” while 30 percent define themselves as “spiritual but not religious” and 6 percent say they are both.⁴ In other words, nine out of ten Americans consider themselves either religious, spiritual, or both.

It may also surprise some that at the beginning of the twenty-first century, religion in the United States appears to be gaining a reputation for relevance. In 1984, Barna found that 41 percent of Americans fit the “born gain” category in 2001. Barna Research Group, “Annual Study Reveals.”


¹Gallup and Lindsay, 10. In the World Values Survey, 84 percent of the respondents would consider themselves religious persons. This was well above the global average of 63 percent. Inglehart, Basáñez, and Moreno, V151.

fewer than 60 percent of Americans agreed that “religion can answer all or most of today’s problems.”¹ Fifteen years later (1999), the percentage had increased to 68 percent.² At the same time, when Americans looked at their society as a whole, a majority felt that religion was losing its influence in America.³ Ironically, more and more Americans believe that religion can provide the answers to contemporary problems, while at the same time believing that religion is becoming less and less influential. In any case, Americans are interested in God and the spiritual life. The fields, as Jesus said, are ripe for harvest (John 4:35).

The Evangelist’s Freedom

Christian communicators should be flexible in what they say about salvation. Instead of striving for uniformity of presentation, Christians must recognize the tremendous freedom they have as they share the gospel with others. There is no pattern of set phrases that must be spoken, no series of Bible verses that must be read or laws that must be explained. In short, there is no ordo salutis that must be followed.

This freedom, however, does not mean that a messenger may say whatever he or she desires. Instead, the messenger must share a message that, while in harmony with the Bible, is receptor oriented.

¹Gallup and Lindsay, 20.
³Fifty-two percent said this was the case, while only 42 percent believed religion was increasing its influence. Gallup and Lindsay, 11.
The Necessity of Receptor-Oriented Messages

When Bright wrote the four spiritual laws, he presented them as a transferable concept which could be reproduced for generations without a loss of meaning. Just a few years earlier, F. W. Dillistone had contended that the essence of the gospel\(^1\) "must constantly be re-interpreted and re-applied to other histories, and in this way its significance will expand and grow."\(^2\)

Communication theory reveals that Dillistone's contention is true. The Christian communicator must not simply learn a script and repeat it verbatim to person after person, in culture after culture, generation after generation. Rather, true communicators must ask themselves how the receptors' history will affect their hearing of the story and then communicate in a way that takes this different history seriously. In short, responsible communicators must be receptor oriented.

How can this be achieved? Dillistone uses the term "imaginative identification."\(^3\) Others have designated it the "indentificational approach."\(^4\) Dillistone suggests that a communicator must be more like an artist. "He is constantly seeking to identify himself with those for whom he is doing his work. At the same time he is constantly seeking to

\(^1\)It is valuable to be reminded that most North Americans have no idea what the "gospel" refers to.


\(^3\)Ibid., 150.

\(^4\)Kraft contrasts this identificational approach with the "extractionist" approach in which the communicator demands his or her own frame of reference and communicational categories be used rather than the receiver's. Kraft, *Christianity in Culture*, 152.
gain a greater mastery of the material which he has chosen as his medium.”

The twofold emphasis must be noted. Typically, communicators have focused on the mastery of the material and neglected the work of identifying with those they are attempting to reach. A decided effort is required for the Christian who wishes to keep a better balance between the two.

Specifically, evangelicals must maintain contact with the wider culture. This must involve intentional and consistent study of cultural trends with the aim, not of adopting the popular mind-set, but rather, of understanding that mind-set. Key avenues for such understanding are popular music, film, and books. Evangelical failure in this area is evident from the very title of Bright’s gospel presentation: the Four Spiritual Laws, an oxymoron to many Americans.

The call for receptor-oriented communication, which requires the communicator to understand the audience, is not a newly discovered communication technique. Even a cursory reading of Scripture reveals that it is an attempt to emulate Jesus and the apostles. Jesus was not a tax collector or a pharisee, but he understood the issues and challenges both faced. Jesus mingled with both groups and thus was able to communicate with them appropriately. Evangelicals must have the courage to follow his lead. They too must know their audience well enough to communicate in a way that is sensitive and demonstrates an understanding of their receptors’ frame of reference. This foundational concept forms the basis for the following recommendations.

1Dillistone, 150.
The Search for Indigenous “Eye Openers”

Receptor-oriented communication theory, as well as the conversion stories in Luke-Acts, indicates that the message of salvation must be presented as an indigenous message, arising from and illustrated in the listener’s culture. In America, for example, evangelists should seek out appropriate clips from popular movies and segments of popular music that would illustrate their message, instead of using the usual tracts with line drawings of steam trains or crosses. In short, evangelists must communicate with the receptor’s culture in mind. Rather than turning to past, accepted formulations of the gospel, evangelists must communicate in ways that are relevant and contemporary.

In this context, the concept of a redemptive analogy must be revisited. There is a great deal of truth in the old saying, “A picture is worth a thousand words.” If a communicator wishes to influence a receptor’s beliefs and actions, the message must be illustrated. More specifically, it must be illustrated from the receptor’s life context. While the image of an innocent life, sacrificed for the sin of others, would have made sense to the Jewish mind, it would have made less sense for most Gentiles. It is not surprising, then, that when the Gentile author Luke wrote to other Gentiles, the central salvific event was not the cross. Luke instead emphasized the exaltation and ultimate power of the one who was murdered, but who was raised to life and who now was judge of all. Evangelists in North America should follow Luke’s lead, and seek to present the

1 The concept of a redemptive analogy was first introduced in chapter 4.

2 R. Hughes, 280.
message of salvation as good news that makes sense to North Americans.¹

Missionaries have recognized the validity and the power of using this approach in their communication of the gospel. Perhaps the best-known case is that of Don and Carol Richardson, who served as missionaries to the Sawi people of Irian Jaya.² The Sawi were a cannibalistic people, a violent, stone-age tribe. The Richardsons worked for many months to learn the Sawi language, establish relationships, and share the story of Jesus.

When Don Richardson shared what he believed was the "core" of the gospel—the account of Jesus’ betrayal, arrest, and crucifixion—he realized that the story did not have the effect he had hoped. The Sawi listened intently, but rather than being touched with Christ’s love for them, they were impressed and awed by Judas Iscariot.

The reason behind this was illuminated by Sawi culture. For the Sawi, treachery and unsuspected betrayal were admirable virtues. Judas had successfully betrayed someone who called him friend and was thus a hero. The very essence of the gospel seemed unable to penetrate the minds of the Sawi people. The Richardsons, wearied of the constant bloodshed between tribal clans and unable to gain a real hearing for the

¹Throughout the Gospels, there are examples of Jesus doing the same thing. He taught with stories, illustrations, and analogies that arose from the life experiences of his receptors. To fishermen he spoke of fishing for men (Luke 5:1-10) and to a woman at a well he spoke of living water (John 4:1-26). As he did so, he opened and touched hearts. He was able to take elements from within his receptor’s frame of reference and use them (whether they be things, activities, beliefs, or rituals) and clothe them with new, eye-opening, and potentially life-changing meaning.

²Their experience is told in Don Richardson, Peace Child (Glendale, CA: Regal Books, 1981). The brief summary here is taken primarily from 176-178 and 193-206. A helpful overview of the Richardson story may also be found in Seamands, 133-136.
gospel, prepared to leave. It was then that they witnessed a fascinating interaction between two warring villages.

All the people from both villages gathered on opposite sides of a jungle clearing, prepared for battle. Suddenly, one of the warriors retreated from the front lines, ran to his wife and snatched his young son from her arms. He then rushed across the clearing and placed the boy in the arms of an enemy warrior and asked that peace be made. The warrior received the child and answered, “It is enough. I will surely plead peace between us.” All those in the receiving village then placed their hands on the child, signifying that they accepted the child and the peace he brought. This same process was then repeated from the other side.

The Richardsons were stunned and wondered what terrible fate awaited the two babies. Later, a Sawi warrior explained that each boy was a “peace child” who would be especially cared for. As long as both children lived, there would be peace between the villages, for everyone who placed their hands on the child had pledged to live at peace with the ones who gave it. After all, people who would give up their son could certainly be trusted. In the Sawi culture, to do harm to the peace child was an unthinkable crime. Following the initial ceremony, both villages celebrated with great joy, for the cycle of revenge and death had been brought to an end by the peace child.

In this ritual, Richardson saw a powerful illustration of God’s reconciliation with humanity made possible through the ultimate “Peace Child” Jesus Christ. Richardson called this Sawi ritual a “redemptive analogy.”

1Don Richardson defines a “redemptive analogy” as “contributing to the redemption of a people, but not culminating it.” Eternity in Their Hearts (Ventura, CA: [Publisher])

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once again, he did so utilizing the peace child concept.

Now, the Sawi response was quite different, for they finally heard the good news. Judas was now despised, for he had betrayed the peace child! The Sawi saw in Jesus their hope for peace between each other, as well as the only hope for relationship and peace with God. Within months, these two clans of Sawi tribespeople “laid their hands” on Jesus, God’s Peace Child, and a vibrant Christian community was born.

Richardson suspected that other cultures contained their own redemptive analogies that could be used to help people understand the gospel. His research led to another book entitled *Eternity in Their Hearts*. In it, Richardson shares examples of various redemptive analogies embedded in cultures around the globe. He asks: “Has the God who prepared the gospel for the world also prepared the world for the gospel?” For Richardson, the answer is a resounding yes. God has, Richardson suggests, already “prepared the Gentile world to receive the gospel.” The Christian communicator’s task is to find the illustrative elements that God has already placed in a culture that can serve as redemptive analogies that find their ultimate fulfillment in Christ.

Sadly, Richardson never fully explored what redemptive analogies might be

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Regal, 1981), 61. It is on this very point that Richardson has apparently been misunderstood. See also Bruce A. Demarest and Richard J. Harpel, “Don Richardson’s ‘Redemptive Analogies’ and the Biblical Idea of Revelation,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 146 (July-Sept. 1989): 335.

1D. Richardson, *Eternity*, 27.

2Ibid., 28.

effective “eye-openers” for Christian communicators in North America. Here lies a tremendous challenge, an untapped opportunity.

Just as Richardson had to re-tell the salvation story to the Sawi in light of their culture, so also the Christian communicator must re-tell the story of Jesus if it is to truly speak to Americans today. As the story is re-told, the message of salvation is not diluted, but strengthened.

Herein lies a challenge for Christian communicators. Redemptive eye-openers for American culture have not yet been constructed or employed. Evangelicals must prayerfully seek out these “eye-openers” and use them. The gospel story is still true and still relevant, but it does not seem so as it is described by Christians today. As a result, society and the church languish.

The Call for Dialogue and “Mirroring”

The evangelist must involve the receptor in the process of communication. Rather than presenting four laws and asking the potential convert to accept the message at its conclusion, the evangelist should expect the recipient of the message to actively participate in the communication process. This is most clearly demonstrated by Jesus in his interaction with the expert in the law and the rich ruler. When the lawyer asked Jesus about what he must do to inherit eternal life, Jesus immediately involved him in his answer. “What is written in the law?” he replied. “How do you read it?” After listening to his answer, Jesus told him he had answered correctly. “Do this and you will live” (Luke 10:26, 28). In the case of the rich ruler, Jesus responds to the question with one of his own (“Why do you call me good?” Luke 18:19), then reminds the ruler that he already
knows the commandments (Luke 18:20). The receptor is not lectured about salvation but, rather, is invited into a dialogue on the subject. Receptors may already know the answer to their question, but they must be led to discover that answer.¹

One way in which this might occur is through a mirroring process. Rather than attack current cultural views or point out areas of sin in the receptor’s life, evangelists might simply accept people as they are, then invite them to look at their own beliefs as in a mirror. As people have the opportunity to see their own beliefs, attitudes, and values reflected back at them, they may also begin to see themselves as they are. This process of self-reflection, guided by the Christian communicator, will reveal inconsistencies and blemishes in the receptor’s life.

A fascinating example of this mirroring approach comes from the work of Milton Rokeach and his research on American values. In addition to ranking American values, Rokeach studied values and behavior change. As part of his study, he experimented with this “mirroring” or reflection approach with a group of Michigan State University students. His hypothesis was that because people do not want to be illogical and inconsistent, once they recognize their inconsistencies they are likely to take steps to remedy the situation. Rokeach also knew that “if a person is to become conscious of certain contradictions within his own belief system, he must obviously be provided with certain information about himself.”²

¹This is perhaps part of the reason why Luke seems to be so interested in the potential converts, and less interested in the precise message formulated. Instead of an emphasis on what is said, Luke seems to highlight the people whom God chooses to save.

Rokeach demonstrated the impact of this approach on both values and behavior change. After a group of Michigan State University students had completed a survey which asked them to rank various values in order of their importance, the researcher pointed out to the students that, as a group, they had ranked the value "freedom" considerably higher than the value "equality." Then, the researcher said, "Apparently, Michigan State students value *Freedom* far more highly than they value *Equality*. This suggests that MSU students in general are much more interested in their own freedom than they are in freedom for other people."¹ Next, the experimenter suggested that the students spend a few moments looking at their own value rankings compared with the composite rankings of MSU students as a whole. Finally, the experimenter thanked the students for their participation and told them that their values were their "own private business. . . . I only hope that I have caused each of you to think seriously about your own values."² In the control group, students ranked their values but did not have the researcher point out the implications of their rankings.

Rokeach conducted follow-up surveys with the same MSU students several months later and made several discoveries. First, there was a statistically significant and consistent change in value rankings of those in the experimental groups. They consistently ranked *Equality* higher than they had previously, whereas students in the control group (where the experimenter had not reflected their values back to them) showed no change in their ranking of *Equality*. Second, Rokeach learned that those in the

¹Ibid., 237. Emphasis original.
²Ibid., 239.
Experimental groups showed a shift in their entire rankings, now placing social values *(a world at peace, for example)* higher and personal values *(such as a comfortable life)* lower in their rankings.¹

Finally, Rokeach demonstrated that this change in values affected behavior as well. Three to five months after the initial value survey, all students in both the experimental and control groups, 97 percent of whom were Caucasian, received a specially prepared letter from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), inviting them to join their organization for the enrollment fee of $1. Rokeach discovered that those in the experimental group were nearly two and a half times more likely to join the NAACP than those in the control group who had never had their values "mirrored" back to them.²

Christian communicators should not underestimate the importance of what Rokeach demonstrated. Rather than approaching Americans as lost, unhappy, and separated from God because of their sin, Christians could let Americans see themselves as most really are—people who hold mutually exclusive positions and who do not live in harmony with their stated beliefs.

When faced with the question about salvation, Christians might then respond, "Well, what do you think?" or, "What do you think God would want from you?" The answer from the seeker would then serve as the starting point, not for a memorized presentation, but for a genuine conversation.

¹Ibid., 256.

²Ibid., 274.
Rokeach has demonstrated that people respond to observed incongruities in their lives by changing both beliefs and behaviors. The Christian evangelist should learn from this approach, originally modeled by Jesus himself.

The Sensitivity to Divine Activity

In the traditional evangelical presentation, the communicator comes as a teacher-recruiter who shares information in an attempt to convince the receptor to join a new club. The gospel is a set of facts to be accepted, and the evangelist's task is to present the facts in a convincing way. This is quite different from the emphasis in Luke-Acts, where the focus is on God's activity in preparing the potential convert and bringing the convert and messenger together.

The events surrounding the conversion of the eunuch, Paul, Cornelius, and the jailer in Philippi illustrate this point. In each case, God acted to bring unlikely people together for his purposes: an Ethiopian eunuch and a deacon, a persecutor of the church and a believer, a Roman centurion and a Jew, and a pagan jailer and his prisoners. Whether it was a light and voice at noon on the road, a vision of unclean animals descending from heaven, or an earthquake in the night, these events did what a clear presentation of the mere facts of the gospel never could have done.

Such divine manifestations stretch the comfort level of most Western Christians, who choose to focus on techniques and strategies for "targeting" and "reaching" the lost. Anthropologist Paul Hiebert suggests that Platonic dualism and materialistic naturalism in the Western world have gradually led to blindness to, and even disbelief in, God's interest and activity in the affairs of this world. Hiebert is to be applauded for his call for
a “holistic theology” which “includes a theology of God in human history—in the affairs of nations, of peoples, and of individuals.”

Too often, however, contemporary American evangelists see it as their responsibility to present the message, and then pray for the Holy Spirit to convict those who listen. Instead, evangelists must realize that good techniques and an accurate message are not the key to a successful presentation of the gospel. God must guide them in whom they speak to, when they speak, and what they say. Unfortunately, Western evangelical Christianity has focused more on the human activity of witnessing and less on the witness as someone who recognizes and responds to God’s divine activity in the lives of others. It is the Spirit who orchestrates each meeting and prepares the heart of the receptor, often through supernatural and highly emotional experiences.

This helps to explain why Luke seems somewhat uninterested in the precise details of the message of salvation. God has brought the messenger and the recipient together; it is not the message alone which convicts or convinces but, rather, God’s activity in the potential convert’s life that first opens the door to salvation. Salvation has already been extended by God himself; the human messenger simply acknowledges and responds to what God has already done by helping the receptor through the open door.

The Invitation to Community

Seekers of salvation should clearly understand that their reception of salvation involves acceptance into a new community. This “open door” should be presented as the

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door to God and fellowship with other believers, not merely as entry into a specific church or denomination. The common perception of "church" goes contrary to the values of most Americans; it is perceived as a hierarchical organization that believes in absolute truth and expects conformity to ultimate, objective standards. The church expects time and asks for money, and many Americans view it as intolerant of both people and ideas.

This view of organized religion is further dimmed by the image Americans receive of television "evangelists." When Americans were asked to grade seventy-one different professions for honesty and integrity, "television evangelist" ranked lower than sex therapist, bartender, prison guard, soap opera star, car salesman, and street peddler. In fact, of the seventy-one professions ranked, television evangelists ranked sixty-ninth, just below "prostitute" and just above "organized crime boss" and "drug dealer." This demonstrates the widespread belief that televangelists are more about marketing and money than ministry.

While television evangelists are obviously not the only Christian communicators in the United States, they constitute a dominant image for secular Americans who do not attend church and only catch glimpses of "preaching" as they surf the television channels. It is little wonder that these non-churched Americans are not drawn to "evangelistic" meetings. They are even less likely to be drawn to the churches that support such evangelists.

While most Christians may seek to distance themselves from popular

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1 Patterson and Kim, 142-43.

televangelists and dispute the accuracy of American perceptions of "church," these perceptions are nonetheless reality in the minds of many Americans. It is no wonder that the church makes little sense to so many.

The reason some people come to church anyway is that they are looking for God. People may not have positive feelings about the church, but they often know of no other way to come to God except through the church. So, if they view the church as part of a potential pathway to God, they might come anyway, seeing church as a necessary evil and hoping it will be as painless as possible. In light of all this, messengers can lessen this apprehension by speaking primarily about God, Christianity (which is admired and viewed as relevant), and community, without an initial focus on joining a church.

The situation in India is potentially parallel to that of the United States in this regard. Herbert Hoefer, author of Churchless Christianity, notes that most Indians hold an extremely negative view of the Christian church. At the same time, Hoefer discovered that a significant number of genuine Indian believers in Christ openly profess their allegiance to Jesus—and to biblical doctrines—but have never become a part of a Christian church. They believe in Christ and witness to others, but refuse to be associated with a church that they feel does not reveal Jesus clearly. Thus, the Christian church in India cannot, in its present form, hope to evangelize India. He writes, "The move toward an indigenous Christian faith can never come from the Christian community. It must grow out of the 'Churchless Christianity' with the help and encouragement of the church."¹

This does not mean that new believers who come to Christ are left without the support of fellow believers. Instead, it means that the religious community may be a less formally organized, more flexible, mentor-based community, which views itself as a group of people supporting one another in their spiritual quest, corresponding to what Robert Bellah would call a mystical community.¹

The Wise Use of Scripture

As previously noted, the typical evangelical presentation quotes frequently from the Bible, particularly the New Testament writers Paul and John. These quotations are used to establish facts. It is also clear that American attitudes toward the Bible have changed significantly in the decades since Kennedy, Bright, and Graham wrote their gospel presentations. The Bible is still deeply admired, but it has lost its status as an unquestioned authority in all areas of life.

With this in mind, in their initial presentation of the gospel, evangelicals should avoid using Scripture as an authoritative voice which establishes fact. I would make two suggestions about the use of the Bible as one shares the message of salvation with others. First, make use of the whole testimony of Scripture, including the Old Testament and the currently neglected writers of the New Testament such as Luke. Second, use the Bible as

¹Drawing upon the work of Ernst Troeltsch, Bellah explores three conceptions of religious community: church, sect, and the mystical community. Church refers to a religious organization that enters the world in order to influence it, has a hierarchy of the more spiritual to the less spiritual, and oversees the believers' spiritual growth. Sects focus on purity, see themselves as the gathered elect, and, especially at their beginnings, appeal to the poor and less educated members of a society. As described and defined by Bellah, the sect is the dominant form of American Christianity. The third type of religious community is the mystical community. Perhaps an example of such a community might be Alcoholics Anonymous. Bellah and others, 243-245. 

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a resource which gives insight into the experiences of others. In other words, rather than quoting a scattered series of single verses to establish some fact, appeal to the stories in Scripture that will help to illuminate the receptor’s situation. The Bible should be used as helpful guide, not an encyclopedia, dictionary, or legal document.

This is especially true if the potential convert is unfamiliar with Christianity. Divine activity in their life may lead them to be open to God, but they may be unprepared to immediately accept the Bible as God’s authoritative word. The messenger must recognize this, and respond accordingly, perhaps even avoiding the explicit and repeated use of Scripture. In time, God is certainly able to establish the trustworthiness of his word. This trust must not be expected or demanded too soon.

Content Considerations

Thus far, the focus has been on presuppositional and methodological considerations for the evangelist in North America. While these are important, the evangelical gospel presentation in North America can and should change in content as well. In other words, it is not merely the packaging of the message which should change, but the content of the message itself.

My suggestion that the content of the evangelical gospel presentation should change may sound heretical. Thus, I want to show the rationale for such a call before suggesting certain content themes that might be effectively employed in America.

As noted before, Luke-Acts does not contain a paradigmatic salvation message which must be presented to every spiritual seeker. Biblically, it is clear that the question about salvation is answered differently depending on the audience and the situation.
However, while there is no Lukan salvation formula, there are several themes and emphases which appear with some frequency. The evangelical gospel presentation differs from Luke-Acts in two ways. First, evangelicals appear to have established a salvation formula. Second, they have emphasized themes which may not be found in the conversions stories in Luke and Acts.

In the evangelical gospel presentation, for example, there is a consistent call for repentance and a focus on Jesus’ death on the cross as a sacrifice for human sin. These two points of emphasis are considered by many as the core of what must be communicated; in other words, the core of the gospel. Surprisingly, these points of emphasis are not present to the same degree in Luke-Acts.

As noted earlier, the language of repentance is noticeably lacking in the conversion pericopes in Luke-Acts. Certainly, the concept of a new life orientation is present, but the evangelical preoccupation with sorrow for and turning away from sin is not as evident. Jesus reaffirms that the lawyer already knows the secret of inheriting eternal life—to love God and love others. Jesus promises, “Do this and you will live” (Luke 10:28). The same is true with the rich ruler. In order to inherit eternal life, he is not called to confess his past sin, but rather, to live a life of following Jesus. One likewise searches the stories of Zacchaeus, the criminal on the cross, the eunuch, Cornelius, Lydia, the jailer, and Paul to find the starting point of the gospel message as a statement of the convert’s sin and need to repent. Instead, as previously noted, the emphasis seems to be on the religiosity and goodness of the potential convert. Furthermore, for Luke, the cross was a place of martyrdom. The salvific event Luke focuses on is the resurrection and exaltation of Jesus.
Odd as it may sound to some, the essential gospel message for Luke is not a call for explicit repentance or a proclamation of forgiveness made possible by the death of Christ on the cross.\(^1\) An evangelical who honestly faces the biblical evidence must admit that repentance and substitutionary atonement are not Lukan conversion themes. If these themes were not crucial for Luke, they need not necessarily dominate a gospel presentation today.

In Luke, the one constant factor in each conversion story seems to be that the convert is led to acknowledge God and/or Jesus as sovereign in his or her life. Whatever information is necessary to bring the convert to this point is the information that must be shared. If one already believes God is sovereign, the call is to live in harmony with this conviction (for example, to obey God’s commands). One who believes God is sovereign but does not yet recognize Jesus as sent from God must know enough about Jesus to recognize him as exalted Lord and king, judge of the living and the dead. In short, salvation comes when people commit their life to God and the One he has sent. The evangelist, then, is not free to say just anything, but rather, must share a message that will move the receptor in the direction of full commitment to God. This gives the evangelist tremendous freedom in approaching the potential convert and must be kept as the final goal.

\(^1\)Evangelists who work cross-culturally are aware that the cross is not the central salvific event in the Bible for a variety of peoples. For example, when Buddhist convert to Christianity Daw Thaung Hyunt desired to present the gospel through art, she did not want to focus on the cross. From her perspective, it was “an overworked Christian cliche that Buddhists reject out of hand.” Clifton Maberly, “Buddhism and Adventism: A Myanmar Initiative,” in *Adventist Mission in the 21st Century*, ed. Jon Dybdahl (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 1999), 239.
With this foundation in mind, I now move to some specific Lukan themes that are not adequately reflected in the traditional evangelical presentation of the gospel, yet hold the potential to communicate effectively with Americans today. The contemporary evangelist should keep these content themes in mind and, when appropriate, incorporate them into a presentation of the gospel.

**The Nearness of God**

In the traditional evangelical gospel presentation, the potential convert is addressed as ignorant, someone who does not know how to be saved. Additionally, the person is a sinner, and God is conceived as keeping his distance from such people. In fact, God resides beyond a chasm which humans cannot bridge and which God will not bridge because of his holiness. For this reason the lives of sinners are not full, abundant, or happy. In short, humans are separated from God.

In the Lukan conversion stories, this emphasis is turned on its head. For Luke, the potential convert is someone who already has some knowledge of God and is a good person. God is very near to the potential convert. In fact, rather than maintaining his distance, God has been near, actively drawing the potential convert to himself. God initiates and seeks; he does not wait on the other side of a canyon for the potential convert to make the first move.

This Lukan emphasis is especially needed in America, where most Americans do not think of themselves as ignorant, sinful people. They consider themselves Christians; they pray and believe God hears and answers prayer. Most Americans have at some time
sensed God’s presence in their lives and most do not see their lives as hopelessly empty and unhappy.

To ask about salvation and be told that God is far off because you are evil does not resonate or ring true. The traditional evangelical emphases do not match the belief and experience of most Americans. Luke’s approach, however, does.

Thus, it might be best to follow Luke’s lead in leading an American to salvation. The messenger should emphasize God’s interest in all people, his immanence, his past and present activity in the seeker’s life. The seeker is God’s child, a child God loves and actively seeks, not from a distance, but from very close by. A better acknowledgment of God’s presence provides meaning, whether life seems to be going well or not. The very question, “What must I do to be saved?” is an indication of the presence and work of God in the seeker’s life. God rejoices at such a question, and the evangelist should state that fact and rejoice along with God!

The Resurrection and Jesus’ Power to Forgive

In the traditional evangelical gospel presentation, the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross is presented as the central, salvific event which brings forgiveness. Jesus’ death is presented as vicarious and necessary because of God’s justice. For Jews, the death of Christ as a vicarious, atoning sacrifice resonated with deeply held cultural concepts concerning sin, blood, and sacrifice. In short, the death of Jesus on the cross was used as a redemptive analogy that connected with that world in a powerful way.

The problem, of course, is that this image of salvation does not resonate with contemporary American culture. In the American justice system, one person cannot be
punished for the sin of another. Likewise, the entire notion of blood sacrifice as necessary for forgiveness has not been a part of American culture. Blood does not hold the same meaning for the American as for the ancient world, and images of shed blood in any form sounds barbaric to many. In spite of this, evangelicals continue to present the death of Jesus on the cross as the central, salvific event.

As already noted, for Luke, the death of Jesus on the cross is not the only (and certainly not the central) salvific event. Luke does not ignore the cross, but he presents it as a place of martyrdom and suffering, a place where an innocent man (who was divine) suffered unjustly. For Luke, salvation comes because this same Jesus was resurrected and is now seated as judge of all. Forgiveness comes because Jesus is powerful enough to proclaim it. Rather than attempting to describe how such forgiveness is forensically possible, Luke points out that Jesus is able to forgive. The convert need not know all the details. Forgiveness is not explained, but proclaimed. The good news is not how forgiveness can come, but that it is presently being offered by the divine, exalted judge.

Instead of attempting to familiarize potential converts with the Jewish sacrificial system, with its requirements of blood, evangelists should follow Luke's lead: They should tell how God can bring triumph through undeserved suffering, how great defeats can be turned into victory, how there is meaning in suffering, and how Jesus' faithfulness to God in the midst of injustice and suffering resulted in exaltation and victory. We too can maintain hope through our suffering. God can bring us through. Jesus understands. Not only does he understand, but he has the power to grant forgiveness, and it is that forgiveness which he now offers. This message was good news for Luke's audience and
it remains good news for Americans today. This good news must be more clearly proclaimed.

The Horizontal Element of Salvation

In the traditional evangelical gospel presentation, salvation is presented as a change in one’s relationship with God. In essence, it is a restoration of one’s vertical relationship with God. For Luke, salvation means much more than this. Specifically, salvation involves spiritual and social deliverance. Salvation refers to entrance into a relationship with God as well as a new relationship with others. The holistic nature of salvation is both biblical and culturally relevant in North America and must be proclaimed.

When a seeker inquires about salvation, the evangelist should remind the seeker of the human need for relationship with both God and other humans. God is interested in both of these areas. He longs for a vital relationship with everyone and wants everyone to find strength and support in their relationships with others. Salvation involves healing and restoration of both dimensions. The one who receives salvation certifies a willingness to enter into a relationship with God as well as to restore broken human

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1In the ancient world, sickness was viewed as a sign of divine displeasure and punishment for sin. Sick persons, then, were also socially excluded, for if God saw fit to afflict, punish, and exclude them from his blessings, certainly godly people should avoid and exclude such sinners also. To be healed meant one moved from exclusion to belonging, from social ostracism to acceptance. See John J. Pilch, Healing in the New Testament (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2000); John Wilkinson, The Bible and Healing (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998).
relationships and enter into a new social group. In short, one experiences a new life spiritually and socially.

**A Realistic View of the Future**

The traditional evangelical gospel presentation suggests that a person who is saved will enjoy a life that is abundant, full, and happy. Success is theirs, and the future is bright and rosy. This promise of the good life does not prepare the new convert for the certain struggles which lie ahead.

In Luke-Acts, one does not find these overly optimistic promises for the convert’s future. The promise of paradise to the thief was not a promise of immediate relief from the shame of crucifixion. The fact that salvation came to Zacchaeus’s home was not a guarantee that, from that point on, all people would respect and honor tax collectors. In fact, in Paul’s conversion account, explicit mention is made of the suffering he would have to endure for the sake of Christ.¹

In short, in an effort to convince seekers to be saved, evangelists should not promise something that may not occur. Some seekers will be induced to “accept salvation” with ulterior motives, believing that the praying of a simple prayer is a small price to pay for a more successful, happier life. For others, negative experiences following conversion may lead to distrust of all that the evangelist proclaimed. Converts may assume that trouble is a sign that God has not accepted them or, perhaps, that there is no God at all.

¹In Acts 9:16, as the Lord instructs Ananias to go to the blinded Paul, he tells Ananias, “I will show him [Paul] how much he must suffer for my name.”
Rather than promising the good life, evangelists should stress the new life. It is not devoid of troubles or discouragement. However, like Jesus, one can remain faithful to God with the promise that, in the end, faithfulness to God is rewarded. Salvation brings meaning to suffering; it does not end suffering. Entering into life means one never suffers unnoticed or alone. God sees; Jesus understands and one day will make it right. In the meantime, God has saved the convert into a community of faith which will support and love in tangible ways. This is the promise that must be communicated.

The Rituals of Welcome

In the traditional evangelical gospel presentation, the seeker who wishes to be saved is told to “receive Christ.” This receiving is accomplished by praying what is commonly known as the sinner’s prayer. After praying this suggested prayer either silently or aloud, the seeker is affirmed as a saved child of God. This prayer functions as a rite of initiation into God’s family. Kennedy’s gospel outline goes a little farther: The recipient of salvation may also sign a spiritual birth certificate which is to serve as a tangible reminder of entrance into a new life.

Such acts are not emphasized by Luke’s conversion accounts. Instead, Luke emphasizes two other actions associated with the reception of salvation: baptism and table-fellowship. The basic expectation, especially in Acts, is that a new convert will be immediately baptized and will then engage in table-fellowship with the messenger of salvation.

These two activities demonstrate the vertical and horizontal change that salvation brings. The rite of baptism symbolizes the establishment of one’s relationship with God,
while mutual fellowship demonstrates that existing social barriers between people no longer exist. A new community has been established; in it the powerful and the lowly, men and women, Jew and Gentile may all recline at table together in anticipation of the day when people from the East and West will join the banquet with Father Abraham in heaven (Luke 13:28-30).

Both baptism and table-fellowship are shared rites, initiated by the messenger or the receptor. The receptor can ask to be baptized (as did the eunuch), or the messenger can call for baptism (as Ananias did to Paul and Peter did to Cornelius). In Luke’s stories, it was usually the convert who hosted the messenger. In other words, the messenger was the guest, not the host of the fellowship meal. In all cases, however, both rites involve two parties—they are not steps one can take alone.

The gospel presentation in North America, if it is to be biblical, must somehow call for meaningful, mutual initiation rites which go beyond a short (and, possibly, silent) prayer or a signature on a piece of paper. In other words, evangelical Christians must establish clear, meaningful, and immediate rites of welcome for new converts.

While some may feel that culturally acceptable functional substitutes for baptism and table-fellowship should be employed, both of these rites should be retained. Water is still viewed as a cleansing agent, and eating with someone in their home is still a symbol of mutual acceptance. These tangible symbols of one’s new relationship with God and one’s acceptance into a new community must be clearly communicated to the potential convert and not be postponed.
Different Gospel Presentations: Six Examples

Six examples show how these methodological and content foci might be incorporated into actual interactions with a spiritual seeker. These are presented as examples, not patterns that must be followed. Each seeker is unique and, thus, each attempt at presenting the gospel should be unique as well. These examples are presented in a colloquial, conversational style in an attempt to recreate how an actual interaction might proceed.

Example One: The Eight Questions

This “presentation” of the gospel is actually a dialogue between the evangelist and the seeker. The evangelist’s goal is to lead the seeker through a process of self-reflection, offering affirmation as well as guidance along the way. The underlying assumption is that God is already active in the seeker’s life. Rather than emphasizing the presentation of facts that the seeker must acknowledge, the interaction is guided by eight questions to be used after a seeker expresses interest in seeking salvation. The eight questions are followed by explanations and/or sample dialogue.

1. Why do you ask?

Before launching into a monologue on the way of salvation, the communicator needs to know the motivation behind the question about salvation. It would be best to say something such as, “Obviously, that’s a very important question. Before I try to answer, though, I’m curious about something. Two kinds of people ask that question. Some people are just curious and want some information. Others are actively searching for spiritual truth and seriously want to make a change in their lives. Which one are you?”

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The communicator may also employ a simple swimming analogy. “Some people may be curious about how to swim; others may be calling out for help as they drown. I’m not sure which one you are. Are you curious about salvation or is your question a real call for help?”

If the seeker is merely curious, a very brief statement is sufficient (see example number 3). However, if the seeker specifies that he or she is indeed actively interested in truth and wants to make life changes, the following questions may be pursued.

2. What do you think God is like?

Research demonstrates that the vast majority (at least 90 percent) of Americans believe in God, pray, and have sensed God’s presence in their lives. In light of this, the messenger may want to say, “At some point in your life, you’ve heard things about God and have probably had an experience where you sensed God’s presence. Based upon God’s previous activity, what do you think God is like?”

With this question, the evangelist approaches the seeker as someone with an important perspective to share. The individual is not merely an ignorant sinner, but rather, someone who knows something and has experienced God at some time in his or her life. The messenger should encourage the seeker to share the times God’s active presence was sensed. This may be a time when the seeker experienced an answer to prayer or experienced a miracle or some other time when he or she felt God close by.

Something interesting may occur at this step. Some people may believe that God is angry with them. They may be somewhat afraid of God. Yet, as they recount the times
when they sensed God's activity or presence, they will notice God's kindness, nearness, and interest in them.

The messenger should listen carefully and, with the seeker, slowly build up a composite picture of the character of God. The messenger should feel free to add to the seeker's view of God from personal experience. If the Bible is referred to, the messenger should do so as a part of his or her personal experience. The messenger may share how fear of God ended with the discovery that God was a loving Father who especially cared for sinners. The Bible is a part of the messenger's experience, not an outside source of authority. The messenger may speak of Jesus as the one who best reveals what the Father is like. Once a reasonably accurate view of God has been arrived at, the next question may be posed.

3. *If that's the way God is, how do you suppose he feels about you?*

This question is closely related to the preceding one. The goal is to help the seeker come to the awareness that the request for salvation comes to a God who has cared for the individual all along and who is delighted to have a response. The seeker will then come to a God who is eager to welcome a new child. Once more, the messenger can reinforce this reality through personal experience.

4. *In the past, how have you responded to God's interest and love for you?*

This provides the seeker with a chance to honestly assess his or her spiritual condition. Most will admit that they have not responded positively to God's interest and love. They may have been apathetic, rebellious, distracted, or perhaps simply ignorant.
5. How should you be responding to God?

With this crucial question, the messenger again demonstrates confidence that the Holy Spirit has already been at work in the seeker’s life. Rather than demanding a certain response, the messenger asks the seeker what he or she feels they should do. Some may feel they should go to church. Others may speak of reestablishing estranged relationships or setting aside certain sins.

If the seeker genuinely seems unsure of what is expected, the messenger may simply ask, “If you were a loving God with a wayward child, what would you want that child to do?” The answer would then suggest what God may want the seeker to do.

What the seeker expresses must be accepted by the messenger as the work of the Spirit. Arguing against the seeker’s conscience would not be wise. However, if the seeker feels compelled to respond to God by performing some illegal, immoral, or self-destructive act, the messenger should refer back to what has already been established about God’s character and attitude of love. The messenger may ask, “Would such a God require you to do such a thing?”

Finally, the messenger must clarify that the performance of some act, however good it may be, does not win God’s favor. God accepts and welcomes all people, just as they are. Once more, this can be illustrated with a question about a family relationship: “Would you refuse to welcome your child home unless she were perfect? Well, neither does God.”

6. What happens when we decide to listen and respond to God?

The messenger should emphasize that “when we decide to listen and respond to
God’s love, we demonstrate a desire to be a part of God’s family, and two things happen. First, God accepts us as we are. We are accepted, forgiven, saved, welcomed. Second, God gives us the strength to live as we know we should even in the middle of the struggles of life. Does this make sense to you?”

7. Do you want to begin to live a life of listening and responding to God?

If the answer is “No,” the messenger may simply ask “Why?” Whatever the reason may be, the messenger should not leave the impression that this “No” has damned the receptor to a life of separation from God. Rather, the interaction should conclude with an appeal for the receptor to continue to watch for God’s activity in his or her life. It may also be that the “Three Barriers” presentation would be helpful in dealing with this situation. If the answer to the question is “Yes,” the messenger should move on to the next step.

8. Shall we tell God that?

Since the seeker has already indicated a desire to orient life toward listening and responding to God, a “No” answer to this question might come from a discomfort with public prayer. It may also be that there is some question or complicating issue which the seeker only now has realized or perhaps had the courage to address. Whatever the case, the messenger should listen carefully and attempt to respond to whatever issue the seeker may be struggling with.

Even when the seeker’s answer is “Yes,” the messenger should offer an option:

1The “Three Barriers” presentation follows.
“Do you just want to pray and tell God about it, or do you want me to help you through a bit?” If the seeker wants guidance, the messenger may lead a prayer that is similar to this:

Dear God, thank you for being a good God who seeks us out and loves us. (seeker’s name) has just told me a bit about his (her) life. (Seeker’s name) hasn’t lived a perfect life. (Seeker’s name) hasn’t even always followed his (her) conscience, and has sometimes taken you for granted and ignored you. (Seeker’s name), do you want to change that? (Wait for the seeker to respond). Do you want to begin a new life of listening and responding to God? (Wait for the seeker to respond.) (Seeker’s name), is there anything else you want to tell God? (Wait for the seeker to respond.)

The messenger should then conclude the prayer, thanking God for seeking and accepting the seeker, and asking that God would provide strength to live a life full of meaning and purpose.

Following the prayer, hearty congratulations should be extended. The messenger should conclude by explaining that such a decision is not one that can be kept secret. A couple who are joining together as husband and wife have a wedding. So too when someone joins God’s family, there must be some public ceremony which demonstrates this fact.

The messenger should note that there are two such ceremonies which symbolize a person’s decision to listen and respond to God and join his family: baptism and fellowship with other members of God’s family.

Baptism should be presented as a sign with multiple meanings. It is a public sign of what has already happened in the heart and demonstrates that one is being born into God’s family. God’s family is where all belong, but being baptized signifies that a person now recognizes that fact. Baptism in water is also a symbol of cleansing. Past and
present sins are washed away and the new family member is welcomed as a pure, innocent child.

The evangelist should also deal with the importance of incorporation into the community of believers. For example, something like this may be said: “We are born into a family. God has other children, and there is another symbol which reminds us of our acceptance into a family that includes other people. In the Bible, those who were baptized often shared a special meal together. It was a sign that they were brothers and sisters in God’s family and would support and love one another as family members should.”

If the seeker so desires, arrangements should be made for baptism as soon as possible. The sharing of a meal together is something that may be done immediately, but it is also wise to plan a more formal, perhaps larger gathering where other believers can be present. This meal should be in someone’s home. Local bodies of believers should decide on what should occur at this meal, but there should be some formal recognition of the new believer’s commitment. At this meal, plans should be made and relationships established for the ongoing nurture and instruction of the new believer.

Example Two: The Three Barriers

This presentation attempts to deal with common barriers people may experience in their relationship with God. This presentation may be useful for the person who senses God’s call to a deeper, saving relationship and who already has some knowledge of God, but who has obstacles in life that inhibit a full response. This is an example of how a
communicator might respond to one who sincerely asks what he or she must do in order to find salvation:

Your question about salvation is a good one. I believe that salvation is offered to everyone. The problem is that many of us have barriers in our lives that keep us from experiencing salvation. The barriers all start with the letter “P,” so they’re pretty easy to remember.

First of all, there is the barrier of faulty perception of God. Some people perceive God in such a way that they have no interest in a relationship with him. Maybe they see God as a harsh judge, a power-hungry ruler, or a distant grandfather who doesn’t really know what’s happening in life and doesn’t really care either. Some think God is to blame for all their troubles. Some are afraid that coming to God means he will then ruin their lives. Some think their sin is so great that God will not be interested in them until they can become better. Some think that being saved requires some nearly impossible feat of holiness that they could never accomplish, so they aren’t even interested in finding out more. Some may want to come close to God, but they simply don’t know how. In all these cases, the barrier to receiving salvation is a faulty or blurry perception of who God is and what he wants from us.

The second barrier is people. We all know people who claim to follow God but are pretty awful people. We might call them hypocrites. They may preach about God, but their real goal is to make money. They speak against sin, but lead immoral lives. They may be judgmental, intolerant, and abusive, all the while claiming to be followers of God. Understandably, some have said, “If that’s what a follower of God looks like, I
don’t want any part of it.” So, people can be a barrier between us and our coming to know God better.

The third barrier is our pride. Some of us know that God is a good God who loves us. We even realize that God has blessed us and, deep inside, we know that God wants us to listen and respond to him. We may have been raised to know God, but at some point, we turned away. Whatever our past, we are too proud to turn our lives over to God. We want to do what we want to do. We may even try to avoid God. In short, our selfish pride is a barrier that keeps us from a relationship with God.

The barriers of perception, people, and pride affect all of us to some degree. Do you feel like any of them describe your situation?

Many seekers may admit that they sense all three barriers. Some may mention one particular barrier which is especially powerful in their lives. How the messenger continues depends on the seeker’s response. Often, simply clarifying the barriers lessens their power. For example, once a person realizes that it is hypocritical people who are keeping him or her from God, the individual will more easily overcome that barrier.

Example Three: The Family

Essentially, this presentation of the gospel is a retelling of Luke 15:11-32, commonly called the parable of the Prodigal Son. Although each messenger will tell the story differently, there are several points that should be noted.

First, the messenger should introduce the story by suggesting the symbolism behind the characters in the parable. For example, the messenger might begin:

There are several ways I could try to answer your question about what a person
must do to be saved, but one of the best ways is by telling a story that Jesus told. It’s a fairly well-known story, so you may be familiar with it. The story is about a family—specifically, about a father and his sons. As the story progresses, it becomes clear that the Father in the story represents God, and the younger son represents all of us who may wander away from God but are interested in coming back. It’s the story about someone who is lost, but ends up found again.

Second, the communicator should note the emptiness of the wayward son. The son comes to his senses and longs for home. In Luke 15, it is an empty stomach that causes the son to desire home, not a sorrow for sin.

Third, it should be stressed that although the son is unsure of how he will be received, he is welcomed by a father who runs to meet him. The son is not treated as he deserved, but is celebrated and totally accepted by the father as a full-fledged member of the family.

At the conclusion of the account of the young son, I suggest that the messenger ask the seeker a question: “Do you share anything in common with the son?” If the answer is affirmative, the messenger may follow up with another question: “Well, based on the story, what’s the answer to the question about what you need to do to be saved?” If the seeker seems unable to answer, the messenger may suggest, “Come to your senses. Head home. Tell God the truth about where you’ve been and what you’ve done. God has been waiting and watching for you. He welcomes you back with open arms. He celebrates that you are part of the family once again. In fact, if, as best you can, you’ve headed home, and in your mind’s eye you can see God running to you, why don’t you give God your speech? Tell him whatever you want to tell him. You can think of it as a
prayer, if that helps. You can close your eyes, if you want. You can talk out loud, or silently. But God is actually here, listening with a very happy heart. Go ahead. I'll just be here, quiet."

The messenger may also give the seeker a hug, symbolizing the embrace of a welcoming God. After this welcome, the messenger should mention the concluding part of the parable. Again, the precise words will vary depending on the messenger and the recipient, but here is an example of what might be said.

"In the story Jesus told, he didn't stop with the welcome home. He also told about an older brother, who had never left home. The brother would represent people who already consider themselves part of the family. For us, that would be people who are already Christians. The point Jesus tried to make was that those people have a responsibility to welcome the new member of the family. God welcomes you, but the rest of us who believe in God must welcome you too. We are all part of one family, with God as our father. One of the ways we do this is by doing what Jesus mentioned in his story: We share a meal together in our home. It symbolizes the fact that you really do belong. We want you to know where we live, we want to eat with you as a true brother or sister. There, we can talk more about life as God's child."

The messenger would then make arrangements for a meal to be shared as soon as possible. It is at this meal that the rite of baptism should be presented. The new convert should understand that the meal is a symbol of the sibling's acceptance and that baptism is a tangible expression of the forgiveness, cleansing, and passage into a new life which is given by God. Once again, the baptism should take place as soon as possible, perhaps even in connection with the meal if the convert so desires.
Example Four: The Curious Questioner

If the one asking about salvation does so out of mere curiosity, the messenger must keep the answer very brief—so brief, in fact, that the one asking ends up surprised and essentially begging for more information. Such a possible interaction is given below.

Curious Seeker: I’m wondering what a person has to do in order to be saved?

Well, if you were God, what kind of God would you be?

I’d be a good God. Loving, kind. I’d forgive people, and help them. Things like that.

You’ve just given a pretty accurate description of God according to what the Bible says.

Really?

Yes. Now, if someone came to a God like that and asked the question about what they needed to do to be saved, what sort of answer would God give?

I don’t know.

I don’t know either, because God treats each person in a unique and sensitive way. I do know, though, that God wants to save everyone, he forgives and accepts everyone who sincerely comes to him, and then enables a person to live a life of meaning, purpose, and integrity. That’s the life I want to live.

Example Five: Already Saved!

A genuine question about how to receive salvation indicates that God is already
working in a person’s life and that the individual is responding to God’s work. In some cases, perhaps the less said, the better. This is an example of such a brief encounter.

Seeker: What must I do to be saved?

Messenger: *If you’re honestly asking that question, and prepared to respond, then I would say you’re already saved.*

Seeker: How is that?

Messenger: *Well, it’s the sort of question that indicates God is already active in your life, and you are responding. You’re seeking a closer relationship with God, and God says that he will receive all who come to him. So, I believe you are saved. The question, then, is how you should live as a saved person. What does God expect of you. That’s something I’d be happy to talk about. Shall we?*

**Example Six: The Seeking Parents**

When possible, contemporary illustrations from popular culture should be employed as a part of the presentation of the gospel. Although these illustrations are not perfect allegories, they can powerfully illustrate key spiritual truths. The following news story may be used to highlight God’s desire to be reunited with his children.

New York Giants coach Jim Fassel and wife Kitty have reunited with the son they gave away for adoption 34 years ago.

“For John, Kitty, and myself, we have lived with an unanswerable question for all these years,” Jim Fassel told *The New York Times.* “If someone had granted us one wish in the world, it would always have been to be together and to know things were OK. Instead, you carry this question around with you and you never know how it will come out. So to have a day like today, it is a miracle.”

The Fassels, who were unmarried when John was born, were able to track down Mathieson thanks to a recent change in Colorado adoption law. They first spoke with him on Mother’s Day, discovering that Mathieson was married with
four daughters. . . .

"I just lost it and cried for two hours straight," said Mathieson. . . . "My greatest fear in life was that I would want to find my natural parents, but they wouldn’t want me to find them. To find out they were looking for me brought out more emotion than I could ever describe."

This story could be used if the seeker struggles with a sense of estrangement and alienation from God. While God obviously has not given up his children for adoption, he does actively seek to be reunited when separation occurs. This story allows a messenger to stress that the spiritual seeker is likewise being sought by a loving God.

**Recommendations for Further Study**

This study of the evangelical gospel presentation’s effectiveness is far from comprehensive in scope. There remain a number of areas where further exploration would be profitable. I suggest six such areas where further research is needed.

1. While this study focused on the dominant gospel presentation among evangelicals, a number of other Christian groups have developed and employed other unique presentations of the gospel. A review of these less influential, but potentially effective, presentations would be worthwhile.

2. A more comprehensive study of all the conversion accounts in the Bible could produce new insights and ideas for the communication of the gospel today. While Luke-Acts is a good place to start, more biblical research on conversion should be done.

3. Mission practitioners, while seldom recognized as accomplished theologians, daily face the task of critical contextualization. Their discoveries seldom appear in

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scholarly publications and remain difficult to access, but a careful study of their work would serve as both as an inspiration and resource for same-culture Christian communicators.

4. This study briefly explored the concept of a “redemptive analogy” first popularized by Don and Carol Richardson. While cross-cultural missionaries may be trained to search for such indigenous eye-openers, American evangelicals do not appear to be actively searching for redemptive analogies that would communicate powerfully to Americans. Creative efforts should be made in this area.

5. There is a wealth of consumer information which American businesses use as a resource to guide in marketing. Evangelical communicators should make better use of this information and craft messages to specifically target the intended audience. An effort to develop gospel presentations for specific population clusters would be of great benefit to evangelicals.

6. This study suggested two rites of welcome which appeared frequently in Lukan conversion stories: baptism and table-fellowship. The role of table-fellowship as a sign of entrance into the Christian community has not been fully examined from a biblical perspective and deserves further study. In addition, the practical question of how these rites of welcome might be incorporated into existing ecclesiological structures should be addressed more fully.

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