IS IT STILL GOSPEL PREACHING?

The 21st-century Makes Demands of Those Who Want to Communicate the Richness of the Gospel.

By Leighton Ford, Leadership Journal

At the Los Angeles Coliseum in 1963, Helmut Thielicke, a distinguished German theologian and preacher, heard Billy Graham for the first time. Thielicke had come reluctantly. German pastors had been suspicious of mass rallies ever since Hitler used them to manipulate and seduce their nation.

His visit led to an unlikely encounter.

After the crusade Thielicke wrote Graham: 'The evening was a profound "penance" experience (poenitentia) for me. ...When I have been asked now and again about your preaching, I have certainly not been too modest to make one or two theological observations. My evening with you made clear to me (and the Holy Spirit will have helped in doing so!) that the question should be asked in the reverse form: What is lacking in me and in my colleagues in the pulpit... that makes Billy Graham so necessary?' Thielicke concluded: 'We learn to see ourselves as various dabs of paint upon the incredibly colorful palette of God.'

Graham, characteristically, asked Thielicke how to improve his own preaching.

The two effective but very different preachers were learning from each other.

Now, a half century later, we're still learning what it means to effectively preach the gospel.

Our Edge and the Sermon's Core

Every sermon should have the gospel at its core and an invitational edge. This is not to say that every sermon should aim at not-yet-believers. Most sermons will be heard by people who already have some knowledge of Jesus. But every sermon needs a spirit that invites people to follow Jesus.

How could George Buttrick have known one Advent Sunday morning at Madison Avenue Presbyterian in New York that a struggling young novelist would be present, or that a single question ("Are you going home for Christmas?") would be the spiritual pivot point for Frederick Buechner?

More recently, Efrem Smith, who pastors Sanctuary Covenant, a three-year-old church aiming to be a multi-ethnic, holistic, and Christ-centered community serving urban North Minneapolis, captured the core and the edge of gospel preaching.

One Sunday he preached that the gospel speaks to our lives now as well as our eternal lives:

"How many kids have to die, while we go home still talking about churchy stuff? How many homicides have to happen before we stop playing church and become the kingdom of God in the streets? Kids are dying, and we are in church."

As he invites people to be prayed for, many come forward, for healing, for a reconciled relationship with God, for passion and purpose in their life.

The gospel is the core, with an invitational edge.

So we preach the gospel never knowing what listeners have been drawn by the Holy Spirit. We also preach knowing that those who are already Christ-followers need to be constantly re-evangelized, reminded that our faith journeys continue as they began, by grace. And that the way we preach in the pulpit may be a model for disciples to know how to talk about their faith in the marketplace.

In addition, our own souls need it!

"Woe is me," said Paul, "if I do not preach the gospel." I could not count the number of times my own wayward soul has been called back to the Christ who is alive and well... through my own preaching!

As we preach, here are four challenges:

1. How do we make the gospel clear and fresh?
2. How do we make the promise of the gospel visible?
3. How do we present the gospel as winsome and strong?
4. How do we present the gospel as urgent and compelling?

The Gospel Made Fresh

"It became unforgettably clear to me on this memorable evening, that you, my dear Dr. Graham, are passing out biblical bread and not intellectual delicacies and refined propaganda. I wish to thank you for that."

Thielicke to Graham.

"We do not proclaim ourselves (but) the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ."

Saint Paul

The late Henri Nouwen in Preaching and Ministry wrote that practically no one comes to church expecting to hear something they did not already know. 'The last thing they expect to come from a pulpit is any news."'

So here is one challenge: how do we preach the gospel as fresh to those for whom it seems stale?

Too often preaching has suffered an 'imaginational cramp' (Simone Tugwell), nailing Jesus inside our own small categories, gutting truth by tiresome repetitions. But the gospel itself is grand and rich and flowing. It weaves more threads into a lovely pattern than a Celtic cord, reflects more facets than a diamond turned about in the light.

The 'godspell' has almost endless variations: the 'gospel of the kingdom' (Matt. 24:14); the 'gospel of God's grace' (Acts 20:24); the 'gospel of God' (Rom. 1:1); the 'gospel of Christ' (Rom. 1:16); 'the gospel of the glory of Christ' (2 Cor. 4:4). Yet it has a singular focus: 'We proclaim Christ.' It makes clear that God has come near to us in Christ.

Karl Barth was once asked if he did not agree that God had revealed himself in many religions besides Christianity. "No," he answered (in true Barthian fashion), "God has not revealed himself in any religion, including Christianity. He has spoken in his son, Jesus Christ."

Always the heart of the gospel is the same: Christ has died! Christ has risen! Christ will come again! Yes, but how to express these non-negotiables in fresh ways?

In our postmodern world, many see the gospel as neither good nor news. Perhaps this is because we have simplified it and 'codified' it too carelessly. 'Accept Jesus and you'll go to heaven. Don't and you won't.' True, but not meant to become a truism.

Rick Richardson in his book Reimagining Evangelism, got it right: 'The biggest missing piece in our understanding of the gospel has to do with our angle of vision.' A kingdom angle gives an eschatological vision: God breaks into our world through Jesus to set all things right; and we can enter into God's rule by turning to God's way, putting our trust in Jesus, and becoming part of his special (covenant) people.

The Gospel Made Visible

Paul presents a picture of the Spirit 'transforming us into the same image' (2 Cor. 3:18), and in his great poem to the Colossians has Christ as 'the image of the invisible God' (Col. 1:15).

For early believers this was 'subversive poetry' in a world where images of Caesar were everywhere. Caesar was revered as a son of God, pre-eminent above all. But, counters Paul, Christ is our image. Christ is the one who made it all, holds it all together, will bring all creation together again, and claims to rule us all. Talk about near treason!

Is there an empire whose images surround us?

'The average American person is confronted every day by somewhere between five and twelve thousand corporate messages, all geared to shaping a consumer imagination. Whether you are running a political campaign for the highest office in the land or selling a particular brand of cigarette, it's all about image!' (Brian J. Walsh and Sylvia C. Keesmaat in Colossians Remixed: Subverting the Empire, IVP, 2004). According to Walsh and Keesmaat, 'The primal responsibility of Christian proclamation is to empower the community to reimagine the world as if Christ, and not the powers, were sovereign.'

I am intrigued by N. T. Wright's comments about presenting the gospel in a postmodern world, where new Caesars reign: 'If you simply address the God-shaped blank that people think they've got, the God that you end up with is the God shaped by the blank.'

On a corner in Victoria, Canada, one summer I met a delightful street artist. She said she was sure there is something 'on the other side' but not quite sure what. But she was sure she was not a Christian.

She spoke of her church-going parents on the Canadian prairies. "The most creative thing they do is to watch television." She thought their god was too small.

"Leyana," I said, "do you realize how really great God is? There is nothing puny about him. He made it all – you and your paintings, your animals, and colors." I quoted for her Gerard Manley Hopkins's poem about the Spirit brooding over the bent world, like a great bird with warm breast and bright wings.

She wanted to write it down. "But my parents would think that's too 'new age,'" she said.

I told her just a bit about the age-old greatness of the gospel, the immensity of the poetry of Christ that Paul wrote to the Colossians. Later I tried to catch this

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immensity in a poem of my own:

YOU, POEM

A poem, you, composed to let my glory through.
A word run wry, a wayward child, defiled.
A stain, removed, remade, through harrowing pain.
A body, entered by my Word,
(dark images draining out his blood).
A work revised, by syntax of my grace.
A mirror, to reflect that scarred and lovely face.
A long delight for me once more to read.
Or must it be, again, again, to bleed?

There, I would like to say to all the Leyanas, is creation, and fall, grace and salvation... and, in the final reading, great joy, or great loss. The gospel is not any one formula.

The gospel is a 'power' – one greater than the 'powers' that hold us in thrall – God's kingdom breaking into the disrepute and disrepair of our lives and our world in a way utterly transforming, the Christ of history alive in our lives today.

Gospel preaching addresses the distorted motivations of everyone. It speaks both to the secular humanist who says, "I accept myself as my own god and obey my own laws," and the religious person who says, "I obey, therefore I am accepted." Both are motivated by self-absorption and the desire to be in control.

Pastor Tim Keller makes this point with the biblical story of the two sons, both the rebellion of the younger son ('I want to be my own god') and the pride of the older son ('I have earned my way into the family by being good') with both missing the good news: that 'human beings are more broken and sinful than they could ever imagine, and more loved and cherished than they could ever dare hope.'

The gospel, says Keller, is the power of God to change people (irreligious or religious) from the inside out. "Christ gives us a radically new identity, freeing us from both self-righteousness and self-condemnation. He liberates us to accept people we once excluded, and to break the bondage of things (even good things) that once drove us. In particular, the gospel makes us welcoming and respectful toward those who do not share our beliefs."

The Gospel Made Credible

"My name is Bill, and I'm an alcoholic." That would be my friend Bill speaking. Bill has been a member of Alcoholics Anonymous since his early teens. Bill and I have spoken together at outreach sessions, telling our stories from such different backgrounds, but with the same experience of God's grace.

Bill often reminds me, "There's no seniority in AA." At an AA meeting it doesn't matter whether someone has been sober (or struggling) for 30 years or 30 days. They all know they need God and each other. Realness counts.

When writing this article, I asked people of different ages what would make a preacher effective. One word stood out again and again: authenticity. They use that word, I believe, not in the popular sense of expressing one's 'authentic inner self,' but in the classical sense of sincerity, reality, being what we present, a genuine product of God, a true 'letter from Christ.'
Graham Johnston, pastor at Subiaco Church of Christ in Perth, Australia, says preaching in the unchurched Aussie culture has taught him a lot.

By far the most important quality there, he has found, is the trust factor. Authority in a postmodern culture comes not out of position, role, or title but from the ethos of the preacher, as a good, believable person.

"I don't see my role as providing ready answers to people," he explains. "That is much more of a modernity model. I see my preaching as much more of a process, creating a sense of openness, hoping seekers will see a person who will journey with them. I want to unpack propositional truth in a way that they will see where it comes from. Ask them to suspend disbelief for a while. And then, even if they don't buy what we believe, they will say: this person respected me, showed me how they got there. I'm willing to come again."

Johnston tells of a young woman, a recovering heroine addict who walked into church one Sunday. At the end of the service she said, "You need to know I'm an atheist. I don't believe any of this rubbish."

"It took a lot of courage for you to come here, Becky," Graham responded.

Becky kept coming. Four months later she passed by him on the way out of church, her arms crossed, and said, "You said some good things."

Fifteen months later Becky gave her own story as part of one of Graham's sermons, and told the congregation, "I came here as an atheist. Now I'm baptized. And I really love Jesus."

The Gospel Made Accessible

After watching people come forward at Billy Graham's invitation in 1963, Helmut Thielicke wrote:

'It all happened without pressure and emotionalism. It was far more the shepherd's voice, calling out in love and sorrow for the wandering ones. I saw their assembled, moved and honestly decided faces. Above all there were two young men – a white and a negro – who stood at the front and about whom one felt that they were standing at that moment on Mount Horeb and looking from afar into a land they had longed for. It became lightning clear that

men want to make a decision. I shall have to draw from all this certain consequences in my own preaching, even though the outward form will of course look somewhat different.'

Gospel preaching makes the story compelling and accessible. Or, as Steve Hayner has put it, 'helping people to take steps toward Jesus.'

Paul's breathtaking analogy: 'We are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God' (2 Cor. 5:20).

Imagine! 'God is making his appeal through us.' Preaching, true gospel preaching, is not us talking about God. It is God speaking through us. Could anything be more awesome, more humbling, and, yes, more exhilarating?

We are part of a 'double search,' a kind of homing instinct of the soul that God has placed within each of us, that makes us turn Godward in response to the God who turns toward us and says: 'Come home to me.'

And how does God say that? In many ways beyond our imagination, including the life of Jesus. But God also uses us and the 'foolishness' of our preaching.

Increasingly I think of preaching as helping people to see the clues that God is already reaching out to them, through the beauty, the joys, and pain of their lives. We help them to acknowledge the resistances and attachments that keep them away from God. And then we help them to take steps toward Jesus.

At the churches he has served, in the Philippines, in California, and in Canada, Darrell Johnson, who now teaches at Regent College in Vancouver, sought to cultivate a culture of open responsiveness. He wanted open response not to be some unusual idea, one reserved for special occasions, but a regular opportunity for the first-timer or the hundredth-timer to take steps toward Christ.

Crisis times especially nurtured this expectation. "Your heart may be breaking," he might say. "We have a whole team to pray with you after the service."

There are also regular ways to offer 'safe places' for response. During prayers he might say, "You may have been attracted to faith but don't know what to do with it. Try this. Tell that to Jesus. Say, 'This may sound silly but I'd really like to know if you are real.'"

Sometimes he invites people: "Put your hands on your knees, palm down, and then if you are wanting to know Jesus more raise them slightly."

In the bulletin would be an invitation: 'If you need prayer, or if a loved one does, or if you want to know Jesus, talk with us after the service.' Again: open response becomes normal, nothing unusual.

The forms will differ, as Thielicke wrote to Graham, but the invitation to respond should be there, God making his appeal through us. So, in whatever way we may be led, we can say something like this:

'The journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step. Give as much of yourself as you know, to as much of Christ as you know. It will cost you nothing, and it will cost you everything. But there will be wonder after wonder, and every wonder true.'

Will these new disciples continue on? It's the staying power of Christ that counts. But a final observation from Helmut Thielicke to Billy Graham is worth noting:

'The consideration that many do not remain true to their hour of decision can contain no truly serious objection: the salt of this hour will be something they will taste in every loaf of bread and cake which they are to bake in their later life. Once in their life they have perceived what it is like to enter the realm of discipleship. And if only this memory accompanies them, then that is already a great deal.'

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Winter 2008, Vol. XXIX, No. 1, Page 26