

## EVANGELISM AND THE MEDIA: A THEOLOGICAL BASIS FOR ACTION

*Philip Butler*

*Mr. Butler, Seattle, Washington, USA,  
heads Intercristo, an international Christian  
communications group.*

A bewildering number of cultural patterns, methods of operation, personal opinions, and theological traditions come sharply into conflict as we review the world of Christian mass communications — particularly as it relates to evangelism.

The church, faced with a staggering rate of technological and methodological change, is hard pressed to "keep up." Combine this change with the shaking of the cultural/moral foundations in most parts of the world, and the church has found itself on a sea of controversy with largely no compass.

Much of this controversy is born out of the fact that the church has very few professionally trained media personnel aggressively working in evangelistic use of the media. Possibly more significant, however, the church has not established a *theological basis* for use of the media. It has been "every man for himself."

We have been victims of a myopic view of Scripture. It is consistently said, "One does not find television or cinema in the Bible." This is true. The unstated conclusion, however, is the most dangerous part of this observation. Because television is not in the Bible, it is inferred that "we cannot look to the Bible for guidance as to how to make, distribute, or use our television program." This kind of thinking has had a devastating impact. It has left us with fragmented, often ineffective, use of the media. Most unfortunate, this lack of biblical basis for our use of the media has emasculated our confrontation of the lost. Indeed, one must say that the church's use of media for evangelism today is largely out of touch with those in greatest need.

This paper seeks therefore to outline basic concepts consistent with proven communications theory, providing a correlation with the Word of God.

### *Scripture calls for use of media*

First, Scripture gives a clear mandate for use of the media. From the outset of Genesis, God has given man responsibility for dominion over the natural fruit of this world's element. The question is not, is it right to use high-speed presses or television (or radio, audio-visual aids, cinema, etc.). Rather, it is a question whether or not the specific medium is the right one for the situation under consideration. In Gen. 1:26-31, God placed responsibility for the media in our hands. And the media are vehicles either for redemption or condemnation.

But other scriptural references point more specifically toward a mandate for use of mass media. Review passages like Eph. 5:16-17 and Col. 4:5 where Paul instructs us to "buy up the time." Efficiency of the

media in reaching such large numbers at low cost is a most practical response to our Lord's command for wise stewardship found in Matt. 25:14-30 — the parable of the talents. Such passages should give the church cause to think about the consequences of not aggressively using the media for evangelism. What will God require of us?

The first chapter of Hebrews is one of the clearest statements in Scripture regarding God's *own* use of media. God, after many types of communications through the centuries, at last chose the incarnation itself as the ultimate statement in his use of media. He chose to put his message in the form of a living soul. John 1 states, "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us ...." God used countless other media throughout the Scripture to communicate with men, such as plagues, pillars (of salt, fire, cloud), animals (remember the ass that spoke?), rainbows, and manna. His message of concern, love, judgment, and desire for reconciliation always came through.

### *The Scripture points to goals*

There is an ancient saying: "How will one know when he has arrived if he does not know where he is going?" So it is with mass communications. There must be precisely defined goals — plans for what is expected in audience response and what, ultimately, we want to have happen as a result of this response. The Lord himself spoke to this issue repeatedly in the New Testament. The matter of setting goals or knowing what is expected is covered in such passages as Luke 14:28-30 and Phil. 3:13-14. In these sections we see the clear necessity of goals — defined and visible on a day-to-day basis. The Lord had his face "set like a flint" for the Cross. He knew where he was going. And in John 17 we find him saying, "I have finished the work you sent me to do." Job complete.

Too often our goals are nebulous and ill-defined, leading to hazy thinking and, finally, great frustration and conflict. Setting general and specific goals is essential both for our entire communications program and for specific evangelism segments. If we do not know what we want the audience to do, it is certain the audience will not know!

### *Media form and audience should "match"*

The Bible and communications professionals agree — the message is best transmitted when medium, style of content, and audience are carefully matched. The Apostle Paul makes a strong case for understanding that the audience is remarkably varied from location to location, culture to culture. He points out that the form for the message may have to be modified to meet different audiences, even within a single geographic location. Note what he suggests in I Cor. 9:22: "I have become all things to all men that by all means I might save some." Also, contrast Paul's speech to the Athenians in Acts 17 with his appeal before Agrippa in Acts 26. This is a plea for us to break down the audience into its natural segments — by language, education, ethnic or religious patterns — whatever is necessary for effective communication.

One observer commented, "How do you climb on a moving train? Do you approach it from a right angle? Certainly not! If you do you will most likely be killed. The only way to climb on a moving train is to come alongside, approximate its speed and step on."

### *Evangelism — speaking to everyone*

I Tim. 2:4 indicates that it is God's will that all men should be saved. II Peter 3:9 indicates the same thing. John 3:16 points to "whosoever." Why is it, then, that so much of our media content is directed only to those who are already predisposed to listen to, read, or view our message? Whether it is a great daily newspaper in New Delhi, a television station in Frankfurt, or a specialized magazine for businessmen in Argentina, the same elements are always present: an audience composed of antagonists at one end of the spectrum, the spiritually seeking at the other, and the great mass of the indifferent in the middle. While specific research is lacking, those at the "seeking" end of the spectrum are certainly in the minority. Unfortunately, most so-called evangelism in the media addresses itself to this latter small group. From the above Scripture passages and others, however, we see that God desires that *all elements* of this spectrum should consider Christ.

We in the media have no excuse for not engaging the mind of the totally antagonistic or indifferent. The problem is that it is so much easier to speak to the seeker or the believer who is already convinced. For biblical evangelism to be effective in mass communications we must engage the total range of unbelievers, but, it is a natural function of this type of strategy that there will be less visible results. Of course, the spectrum of individuals and their spiritual condition is very fluid — ever-changing. The individual planning a film, working on a radio program, or writing a book must realize that *he does not control* where people are in the spectrum. Yet it is our responsibility to share the Good News with *everyone*.

Natural guidelines flow from looking at this scriptural imperative of speaking to all men; it is likely that specific content must be prepared for the various portions of the spectrum. Individuals who are antagonistic or indifferent will only "tolerate" certain kinds of media content. At the same time, those who are genuinely seeking answers are usually willing to consider a much more specific, more pointed spiritual message.

### *Evangelism — it is a process not a one-time event*

Men and women who come to Christ in a moment of faith are born anew. Yet the series of factors that have brought them to this point of decision must be carefully considered if we are to make proper use of the media. Every individual who has in faith claimed Christ as Savior has done so *because of a composite of events* or influences in his or her life. No single incident ever ushered a person into the kingdom.

The Scripture makes clear that there is the three-fold nature of evangelism — sowing, watering, and reaping. In I Cor. 3:6 we hear Paul outline this sequence with distinct clarity as he speaks about his own role in contrast to that of Apollos and the Lord himself. In Matt. 9:38 Christ suggests the disciples pray for harvesters to go into the field to reap. The implication clearly is that there had been sowing and watering to bring the harvest to the stage where it was ripe — ready for reaping.

What is the importance of this scriptural principle for those of us using mass communications media? First, our content must be *specifically* targeted for these tasks. As suggested in the previous section, one single

message can rarely bear the full responsibility. With antagonists and the indifferent, we must sow and water. With those who acknowledge spiritual need, we must focus on the task of reaping.

The worldwide problem with Christian use of the media, however, is that we tend to focus on the reaping portion of the task, for it is the message that brings the visible results. Few are willing to assume responsibility, take the risks required for sowing and watering through the media. This is the tough business. Usually this task takes the form of Christian content or Christian viewpoint in a setting that has broad, general appeal. As C.S. Lewis has suggested, we do not need more Christian books. What we do need is more books by Christians about everything else. A man whose life has been transformed by Christ cannot help but have his world view show through.

Look at what Christ himself says in sections of Scripture like John 4:35-38. If your message is one of reaping, you must realize that there have always been those that have gone before in the hard places; sowing and watering with a message to the mind that was not yet ready to accept. And, in reaping, you have only joined in their labors.

Our task, then, is to speak to all men, not a select few. And, when we do so, our strategy must include the total task of sowing, watering, and reaping for it to be true evangelism.

### *Evangelism and the media: what form for what function?*

Let us assume that we have agreed that we must confront the lostness of man where the lost man is presently congregating: television program, magazine, radio program, or newspaper. Further, assume that we have agreed that we are going to provide a message that genuinely speaks to the man or woman in terms he or she understands — the cultural environment and spiritual condition considered. Now, what will you say? How will you present truth?

Turn to the remarkable passage in Matt. 11:2-19 as we hear Christ speak to the issue of form versus function. As in Luke 7:18-35, he outlines in this section the sharp contrast between the life-style of himself and that of John the Baptist. One was an aesthetic, cut off from society. The other was immersed in men's affairs. Christ said to the bystanders, you have rejected both life-styles — and in doing so have missed the truth. You would not tolerate either form in which the message (function) of truth was resident. Neither form conformed to your preconceived ideas of the "package" in which truth could be carried.

Christ concludes this section by crying, "Wisdom will be justified of herself!" Truth is truth and does not need man's endorsement of the package to confirm its own reality.

Grasping this truth could be absolutely revolutionary to the cause of evangelism through the mass communications media, worldwide. If we understood this principle, we would be set free from the curse of traditional forms which we impose on media usage. Particularly, the approaches developed in the West for media would be abandoned when they did not work in other cultures. Better yet, we would be free at the outset to say, "What method will best suit communication of the truth in this given cultural situation?"

With this scriptural liberty the mass communications staff is then faced with the question of knowing the nature of his audience, where the unreached audience is presently congregated and what media form will best suit his message (function) as he seeks to share the life-changing Word of Christ.

### *Media versus the Holy Spirit's influence*

It is a generally held view in communications theory that media do not *change* attitudes but, rather, tend to reinforce pre-existing ones. This then means that we must be aware of man's sinful nature as outlined in Jer. 17:9, Psa. 51:5 and Rom. 3:23.

Man's *nature* is outside the control of media. Only the washing and regeneration of the Holy Spirit will change the heart of man as mentioned in Titus 3:5. Again in John 6:44 there is a clear statement regarding the limitations of the media to effect any permanent change unless *God* draws those who are to be saved.

While the Scripture points to positive principles for use of mass communications, there are nonetheless some solemn warnings. Take, for example, the passages of Luke 8:4-15 or Mark 4:3-20. Christ here shows that it is possible for the truth to lodge in a mind and, under certain circumstances, dislodge later — not having had a basic change take place. So, it appears that media can inspire a "conscious only" conversion — an intellectual commitment without the washing and regeneration of the Spirit. The medium may be a convincing radio program, or the highly persuasive rhetoric of an evangelist. A clear warning to the counting of numbers — especially before discipleship has taken place!

### *Evangelism and our credibility*

In communications theory there is a basic section of research that deals with credibility or believability of the message. The higher the credibility of the messenger, the more weight or faith will be placed in the message. This is often closely related to your knowledge of the messenger — his proximity. You tend to trust the word of a neighbor before you trust the word of a stranger. You transfer the image of your neighbor's reliability to the content of his message — even though the message may be something foreign to you. This is why, for example, short-wave radio is rarely as believable as medium wave or local radio. Many other factors besides proximity influence credibility. But the audience must have reason for believing what we say!

Christ knew the importance of credibility being linked to his message. Read over passages like John 10:38 and John 21:24. Christ said, "You may not believe what I say, but you cannot deny what you see going on before your eyes."

In a fascinating passage in I Sam. 3:19, "...the Lord was with him (Samuel), and did let none of his words fall to the ground." Samuel's words were known to be valuable — they were not cheap but considered important by those around him. Because of this we read later in Chapter 9 that Samuel is characterized as "...an honorable man; all that he saith surely cometh to pass; peradventure he can show us our way that we should go." What more eloquent testimony could be given to credibility of the message!

The quality and authenticity of our media content must be of such nature that individuals unfamiliar with the message of the Gospel will consider the authority of the Gospel because of the other things about our presentation that are familiar.

### *Mass media and the Church — integration for evangelism*

Now we come to the most critical issue of all — the relationship of the mass media to the church.

Scripture points to the fact that it is the *Church* that constitutes Christ's bride. It is the *Church* that is prayed for by Christ himself. It is the *Church* that is given the role of completing the task of reaching all men everywhere with the Good News of reconciliation with the Father through Christ. The mass media, in themselves, have no significance in evangelism — *until they are linked back into a complete circle of strategy with the Church.*

How do we fare when this issue is evaluated in the light of present practices? Largely, we are a failure; functionally, there is little or no link between mass communications strategy and the church.

By church we must understand that I speak of the local, visible body of believers — the group the audience can identify and locate.

Media personnel are principally committed to a form of evangelism that carries with it little responsibility. We "preach for decisions," then leave the collection of the saints, their upbuilding and integration into a cohesive body to a hazy, ill-defined role of the Holy Spirit. Functionally, we seem to trust the Spirit will collect the bits and pieces (the results of our evangelistic effort) into some group that can have fellowship, communion, and the vital roles given the Body in the total task of evangelism. Our Lord in the Great Commission said that evangelism is not complete until we "teach them whatsoever I have commanded you..." (Matt. 28:20). That is conversion *and* discipleship.

An honest look at sections of Scripture like Romans 12, Ephesians 4 and I Corinthians 12 gives good cause for us to ask, "Where do the mass communications media fit into God's media plan for his body?" Does our strategy call for integration with the other media outlined in such biblical passages?

Communications programs that do not specifically tie back into the local, visible church are incomplete and unscriptural.

### *A framework within which to work*

We are, then, brought to conclusions about a biblical basis for evangelistic use of the media.

First, the Scripture gives a mandate for use of the media — woe be to us if the church does not use these resources placed in our hands by God. God himself has used all media that were expedient to the cultural situation — all forms to accomplish his purpose.

There must be clearly defined goals for our use of the media. If we do not know precisely why we are using mass communications — the audience certainly never will.

Our form or style of message must carefully correlate with the audience we are trying to reach — taking into consideration the full range of cultural factors present.

Our media strategy must acknowledge that we do not start from a "zero" as far as audience God-awareness. This should profoundly influence our content.

True evangelism is not just speaking to those *evidently* interested in the Gospel. God wills that all men come to know him. Antagonists, indifferent and seekers alike, have equal right to the Good News.

It will, however, be a process for all. There is sowing, watering, and reaping that must go on in every heart and must be considered in all our media and communications planning.

We cannot be bound by traditional form for the message. Our preconceived ideas about how to package the message may seriously deter effective communication, if not destroy it altogether.

But mass communications media have limitations. No medium other than the Holy Spirit of God has ever produced true conversion. And media personnel must be aware of the distinct possibility of methodically saving men — "conscious only" conversions.

Finally, mass communication is only as valuable in evangelism as it effectively comes to grips with an integrated plan for relationship with the local, visible church.

While countless other communications principles are touched on in Scripture, these concepts, placed into practice in every Christian communications program, will have a singular effect. It is the only hope, if the world is truly to "hear his voice."

## THE AUDIENCE FOR CHRISTIAN COMMUNICATION

*James F. Engel*

*Dr. James F. Engel, Wheaton, Illinois, USA, is Professor of Communications and Director of the Billy Graham program in communications at the Wheaton College Graduate School.*

The world of today represents a rapidly changing environment characterized by burgeoning population growth, teeming cities, young people breaking free from tradition, and dramatic growth of materialism as a motivating philosophy. More than ever before, successful communication strategy requires a sophisticated analysis and understanding of the audience, if the church is to succeed in penetrating societies with the message of Jesus Christ. This paper explores the important questions of why an understanding of the audience is crucial, the types of information needed for Christian communication, and some implications for overall strategy.

### *The communication process*

Assume that an African tribesman turns on his transistor radio and hears the sounds of a hymn followed by the beginnings of an evangelistic sermon. What will his response be? In large part, the answer given by the reader will reflect an underlying theory of communication.

According to one theory which is widespread among some Christian leaders, the primary task of the communicator is to expose the audience to the message and God will do the rest to bring the reader or listener to himself. *Exposure*, in other words, is the basic consideration and the message itself is secondary so long as it contains biblical truth.

In one sense this point of view has merit, because it is undeniable that the Holy Spirit is the agent responsible for human response to the Christian message. More fundamentally, however, it errs by overlooking that a perceptual filter is part of the God-given psychological equipment of every human being. Psychologists have demonstrated conclusively that exposure is only the first stage in communication. The message input then must be processed through a filter which contains the accumulated experience, information, values, attitudes, and other dispositions of the individual. Furthermore, it is now known that this filter can function to prevent the entry of unwanted messages into the central nervous system and, conversely, to enhance the probability that compatible information will be processed and acted upon.

Returning now to the African tribesman, the second theory of communication recognizes the very real possibility that the radio may be turned off through disinterest, or that the message will be completely misunderstood, or that it will not be retained in memory. The key lies in whether or not the filter is open to begin with, and whether or not the