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

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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 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

message is phrased in such a way that it is compatible with his felt needs, interests, and background. To disregard the functioning of the perceptual filter is to raise the very real possibility that communication will never occur and the word will thereby return void!

Is such a communication theory biblical? While the Bible obviously is not a textbook in psychology, it is interesting to learn from the example of Jesus. He invariably approached people in terms of felt need and based his messages on an awareness of his audiences. For example, it would have been absurd for him to tell the woman at the well that she should sell all she owned and give it to the poor, while telling the rich young ruler that he needed living water. On the contrary, Jesus recognized that filters are open at the point of felt need and the individual is receptive to messages which speak to these issues.
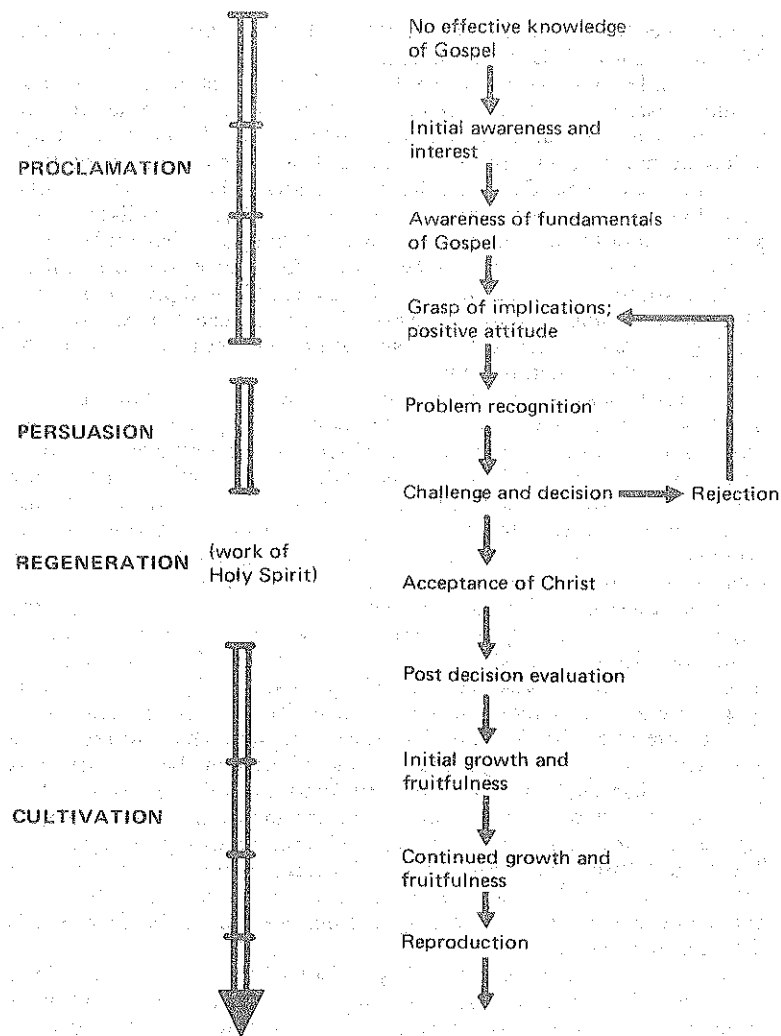
Notice, however, that Jesus did not only contend with the need of the moment. Rather, he took occasion to capture the attention and interest of his audience and to move from that point to present necessary spiritual truth.

The basic principle, then, is that people process communication messages in such a way that they see and hear what they want to see and hear. This has profound implications for communication strategy. First, the communicator who bases message and media on his own ideas of what the audience should hear is pursuing an approach which is fraught with peril. The audience, in effect, is disregarded, not retained, or not acted upon. An *adaptive orientation,* on the other hand, begins with an understanding of the audience and utilizes both messages and media which are appropriate. It is recognized that those in the audience are sovereign and, in the final analysis, have full ability to screen out unwanted or inappropriate messages.

While the adaptive orientation takes full cognizance of human information processing, a careful distinction must be drawn between *constants* and *variables* in strategy. All biblical content, especially the commands, should be viewed as a constant which never changes. The church is commanded to worship, for example, and this is a constant. The program or strategy of implementation of a constant, however, is a variable which changes as circumstances change. In one sense, therefore, the Christian message never changes when it is expressing basic biblical truth, but there is ample latitude to adapt that message to unique individual circumstances in terms of its phrasing, emphasis, and practical application. The danger enters when outmoded communication methods are maintained with scant attention paid to effectiveness.

Understanding the spiritual status of target audiences

Evangelism is communication of biblical content. Granting the principle that messages and media must be adapted to the audience, what does this mean in terms of the historic role of the church? The answers are contained in the Great Commission passage in Matt. 28:18-20. The role of the Great Commission is to "make disciples in all nations" by bringing people from no real awareness of Christ to some level of spiritual maturity as illustrated by the following diagram:

PROCLAMATION

No effective knowledge of Gospel

Initial awareness and interest

Awareness of fundamentals of Gospel

Grasp of implications; positive attitude

Problem recognition

PERSUASION

Challenge and decision ——▷ Rejection

REGENERATION (work of Holy Spirit)

Acceptance of Christ

Post decision evaluation

Initial growth and fruitfulness

CULTIVATION

Continued growth and fruitfulness

Reproduction

SPIRITUAL DECISION PROCESS

Everyone falls somewhere on this continuum. It is the task of communication to utilize an appropriate combination of message and media so that the Holy Spirit can function to draw the individual to Christ for an initial conversion experience and then to conform him to the image of Christ over a lifetime. Becoming a disciple is thus a decision process

which never truly ends. In this sense, the Great Commission has no final fulfillment until Christ comes again.

An understanding of the perceptual filter enters, in that Christian communication must be directed to people in terms appropriate to their current spiritual status, recognizing the extent to which a need for change is felt or not felt, and employing symbolism which is valid for their cultural background. For example, if the majority of those who comprise an audience have only a distorted awareness of Christ, it is likely that a presentation of the plan of salvation will, at that point, have little or no impact, especially if they do not feel a need for change. A more realistic strategy would be to focus on presenting a clear biblical picture of Jesus. This, in turn, would represent successful evangelism if it succeeds in moving a person closer to Christ and disposing him to understand the plan of salvation when presented later.

The first phase of the communicative task, then, is that of *proclamation*. Communication content must challenge presuppositions, raise questions, and present the Christian alternative. The objective is to build an awareness and grasp of the essentials of the Gospel message and, where possible, help stimulate a positive attitude toward the Christian alternative. The objective, then, is to bring about *change* in people as they progress in their decision process. Furthermore, this type of change is measurable using the tools of modern survey research.

Once there is a sufficient base of awareness and positive attitude, the stage is set for a strategy of *persuasion* in which an attempt is made to stimulate a decision. A valid life commitment will not be made, however, unless the individual also has entered into a stage of problem recognition — a state of conviction in which a keen difference is felt between the actual state of affairs and the ideal state of affairs. This will serve as a motivating force for change, and it is a key indicator that the person is "ripe unto harvest." Strategy then will focus on the causes of problem recognition and provide the steps for that initial decision. Then, of course, the Holy Spirit works, upon the invitation of the individual, to "make old things pass away and all things become new" through regeneration. If the inquirer draws back from this step, then the communicator must focus once again on the implications of the Gospel as is shown in the diagram.

Clearly most people in the Third World fall at the top end of the model of spiritual status. No more than two per cent of the Japanese population is Christian, for example. Even Korea, with nearly 100 years of missionary activity and one of the world's great churches, is still 90 per cent non-Christian. The great fallacy enters in the assumption that there usually is sufficient awareness of the basics of the Gospel message to permit large scale results from a strategy of persuasion based on Western-style models of evangelism. More frequently, the communication task is one of proclamation through messages designed to speak to audience understanding in culturally relevant terms.

We only compound the error when we assume without evidence that communication, to be effective, must result in large numbers of converts and consequent church growth. This will happen *only* when there are large numbers who have progressed to the point that persuasion is the ap-

propriate strategy. The fundamental purpose always is to bring spiritual growth in people as they progress in decision processes, not just numerical growth in the church. In this sense, church growth objectives are just a special case of a much broader task:

Biblical and culturally relevant principles are equally necessary to bring the convert to maturity in Christ. Some need initial follow-up to help allay the inevitable doubts which seem to accompany a decision of such magnitude. Others are beginning to grow and need more solid food. Still others are beginning to reproduce their lives in others through evangelism and through teaching "faithful men" (II Tim. 2:2). All will require help in terms of both understanding Christian doctrine and applying it to life. Without a knowledge of the spiritual status of believers, how can communicators even hope to perform their necessary role?

Communication strategy, therefore, cannot be undertaken without an understanding of the spiritual status of the audience. The result otherwise will be to utilize messages and media which are inappropriate and thereby result in little or no movement from one level of spiritual status to the next.

Proclamation and persuasion

What audience information is necessary to achieve success in bringing people to an initial conversion experience? It seems, at the very minimum, that it is necessary to know the extent to which members of the audience have a proper biblical understanding of God, the nature of man, the uniqueness of Jesus, and the steps necessary to make a life commitment. Without proper awareness on these dimensions, it is doubtful that a commitment can be made which will remain and show true fruit.

In addition, the communicator must understand the life-styles of his audience. What are their basic goals in life? What activities are important? What opinions are held on those issues which are central to lifestyle? Particular attention should be directed to those points of felt need and dissatisfaction which signify problem recognition. Of special significance is ascertainment of whether or not there is erosion of basic religious or philosophical values. If so, this is a clear signal that human filters are open and receptive to messages which put forth a logical and realistic avenue for change.

Finally, it is necessary to understand something of basic decision processes. What cultural norms or values are operative? Are decisions made individually or is it necessary to focus on the family, or even on a whole tribe, as a decision-making unit? And what sources of information are efficacious in the decision — i.e., what is the relative influence of the various mass media versus word-of-mouth at the stages in the decision?

Cultivation of the Christian

The Christian communicator also must accept the responsibility of building the Christian to maturity if we take the Great Commission mandate seriously. The starting point once again is the relative stage of spiritual maturity of given audiences. Typically a pastor chooses sermon topics on the basis of what he thinks his congregation should hear. To a certain extent this is consistent with his exhortative role, but it will be

totally ineffective in building the flock spiritually if it ignores the difficulties congregation members are having in applying faith to life. The pastor, and any communicator for that matter, must begin with the people where they are, ministering to felt needs, bringing relevant scriptural truth to bear in practical and understandable ways.

What should the communicator know about the Christian audience? A definitive answer is beyond the scope of this paper, because the answer must, of necessity, reflect a concept of the properties of a mature Christian. Nevertheless, at least three characteristics will be evident in a Christian who has reached the stage where he or she can reproduce life in others: (1) an adequate doctrinal understanding; (2) a grasp of the manner in which doctrine is applied, under the empowering of the Holy Spirit, to meet the recurring needs and problems of life; and (3) a willingness to yield to Christ on a moment-by-moment basis.

Taking this as a guide, it is apparent that the communicator must begin with an understanding of the doctrinal awareness of the audience. Where there are deficiencies, clues are provided for needed message content. Doctrinal knowledge, however, is an insufficient measure of maturity. Doctrinal knowledge, in itself, is of little value if it cannot be applied realistically to the problems of life. Surveys of Christians in the Western world and elsewhere repeatedly indicate the existence of vast areas of unmet problems and resulting spiritual need. It is small wonder that the evangelical church is becoming impotent, without spiritual muscle. Much significant evidence can be gained by focusing on life-style. What are the motivating goals in secular life? What basic values are held? What activities are important? What are the areas of felt need in all phases of life — in the home, at school, on the job, at play? The church must speak to these issues unequivocally if we are serious about building Christians to sufficient maturity that they can reproduce the life of Christ in others. Finally, the communicator must understand those areas where the Christian may be resisting his duty. The social needs of the community, for example, may be unmet and there is little demonstrated desire to take affirmative action. This can serve as a signal for needed exhortation from the pulpit or through the various media. Can this understanding be gained simply by observation and intuition? This is perhaps possible if the audience is very small, but there is the ever-present problem of the "Christian mask." People often are reluctant to reveal needs and shortcomings, and the result is that the body of Christ is inhibited in its functioning. One useful remedy is to utilize properly-designed questionnaires, and this approach is proving to be useful in churches in many countries of the world. Research technique, however, is the subject of another paper in this section of the World Congress.

Some implications for strategy

While many implications for communication strategy have been mentioned throughout, it is worthwhile to stress three essential points: (1) recognize the existence of audience segments; (2) utilize appropriate combinations of media; and (3) measure communication effectiveness.

Audience segmentation

It should be apparent upon careful reflection that there is no such thing as the audience for Christian communication. In reality, there are many audience segments, each of which presents a different communication challenge. Analysis will reveal, for example, groups whose life-styles, needs, backgrounds, and spiritual status differ from others. The communicator then must design messages and utilize media which will be effective for each group. If this principle is not grasped, it will mean that some are receiving totally inappropriate combinations of message and media.

Segmentation may require that the sermon, that evangelical mainstay, be augmented in a variety of ways to meet the needs of different groups. Within a congregation, only by accident can one sermon suffice for all, especially when a congregation is large. Use also might be made of audio-tapes, Bible classes, small-group discussions, literature programs, and other means to adapt to needs of segments within the church.

Combinations of media

It is necessary to experiment with the communication media to discover the relative effectiveness of each in terms of the model of spiritual status discussed earlier. Radio, for example, often proves to be an effective tool for proclamation, whereas it generally plays a smaller role in cultivating the Christian, especially when compared with other means such as books and audio-tapes. The same can be said for other media, and the principle here is that each should be used in combination with others, including the spoken word, to help people advance in their decision processes. This implies, of course, that there must be a *cooperative strategy*, designed to facilitate the spiritual decision-making process for various audience segments. The days of one medium functioning in isolation from others hopefully are drawing to a close.

Measurements of effectiveness.

It was stressed previously that Christian communication is successful only if it can be demonstrated that it has been influential in moving people from one stage of maturity to another. Statistics on church growth are only one indicator of success in winning and building men.

Conclusion

Throughout this paper it has been stressed that communication undertaken without adapting message and media to an understanding of the audience can and often does return void. Why? Because it is a mere caricature of "the Word." Nowhere does the Bible say that man is without responsibility in the communicative process. God is demanding in a new way that we show ourselves as "workmen worthy of our hire."