

Evangelistic Preaching in the Twenty-First Century

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“Who are the most effective evangelistic preachers you know?” When I have asked that question—and qualify it to mean pastors, not traveling evangelists—most pastors, laypeople, and even preaching professors are stumped. They may come up with Bill Hybels or another megachurch pastor. It’s as if I had asked: “How many college students do you know who read newspapers?” So I want to take you on a little memory journey back half a century, to an unlikely encounter between two very effective but very different evangelistic preachers.

On an August evening in 1963 a hundred thousand people gathered in the open-air coliseum in Los Angeles for a Billy Graham Crusade. That night Helmut Thielicke, the distinguished German theologian and preacher, sat on the platform. On his way to speak at a conference, he had come to the crusade rather reluctantly, since German church leaders had been suspicious of mass rallies ever since Hitler had used them to manipulate and seduce their nation. Later, Thielicke wrote to Billy Graham to admit how his stereotypes had been challenged.

I am ashamed that we Christians—including myself—are always susceptible to the preconceived opinions ... The evening beneath (or better, behind!) your pulpit 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 more or less profound 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? ...we learn to see ourselves as various dabs of paint upon the incredibly colorful palette of God.¹

So forty plus years ago the German theologian (a poetic preacher) and the American evangelist (a more matter-of-fact preacher) were learning from each other (for Graham asked Thielicke how to improve his own preaching). Now, a half-century later, I hope we can learn from each other how we can more effectively preach the gospel in our time.

I have learned so much from pastor/evangelists I have greatly admired. Tom Allan of St. George’s Tron sought community at this church in the heart of Glasgow. Sir Alan Walker, superintendent of Wesley Central Mission in Sydney, was knighted for his powerful advocacy of justice for the Australian aboriginal peoples. In Montreal I heard Canon Bryan Green of Birmingham Cathedral preach the gospel simply and answer the searching questions of his large audience profoundly. All were committed pastors. Each was a passionate evangelistic preacher.

Several convictions become clear as I reflect on preaching as evangelism today. The first: *every sermon should have the gospel at its core and an evangelistic edge.* This is not to say that every sermon should aim primarily at pre-Christians; clearly,

most sermons will be for those already in the fold. But every sermon needs an evangelistic heart and note. Could George Buttrick have known one Advent Sunday at Madison Avenue Presbyterian in New York that a struggling young novelist would be present, or that one question (“Are you going home for Christmas?”) would be the spiritual pivot point for Frederick Buechner? Could Jack Jensen have expected poets Jane Kenyon and Donald Hall to be among the handful at his tiny congregation in rural New Hampshire, or have known that a line he quoted from Rilke would alter Jane’s life forever?

So we preach the gospel never knowing what seeking persons have been drawn by the Holy Spirit. But 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. And that 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—even through my own preaching! But if we are going to preach with an evangelistic expectation the challenges come: How do we make the offer of the gospel clear and fresh? The promise of the gospel visible? The spirit of the gospel winsome and strong? The claim of the gospel urgent and compelling?

What are they hearing? The Gospel Made Clear and 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 said 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.”² So here is our challenge: how do we preach the gospel as fresh bread to those for whom it seems stale? How do we proclaim Christ as light to those for whom the gospel is veiled by their own secular or religious philosophies, or hidden by our own ideological and political smokescreens? How do we proclaim it to that increasing number of people who have *never* really heard the story?

Too often evangelism has suffered from 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.” There is no evangelism that does not make clear that God has come near to us in Christ. Karl Barth was once asked at Princeton Seminary 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! But how do we express these non-negotiables in fresh ways? In our postmodern world both believers and pre-Christians may 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.

I think Rick Richardson has got it right: “The biggest missing piece in our understanding of the gospel has to do with our angle of vision.” Biblical evangelism has a kingdom angle, an eschatological vision: God has broken and is breaking into our world in the person of Jesus to set all things right; and we can enter into God’s rule by turning from our way to God’s way and putting our trust in Jesus, and becoming part of his special (covenant) people.³

Christ as Image and Icon

The word “image” has come into my mind as a template to express this transforming gospel, especially Paul’s picture of the Spirit “transforming us into the same image” (2 Cor 3:18), and his great poem on Christ as “the image of the invisible God” (Col 1:15ff). For the early believers this was “subversive poetry” in a world where images of Caesar were seen everywhere. Caesar was revered as a son of God, preeminent 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!

The primal responsibility of Christian proclamation is to empower the community to reimagine the world as if Christ, and not the powers, were sovereign.⁴

I am intrigued by N.T. Wright’s comments about presenting the gospel in a postmodern world, where neo-Gnosticism (and we could add new Caesars) reign:

In Colossians (Christ) is the image of the invisible God. In other words, don’t assume that you’ve got God taped, and fit Jesus into that. Do it the other way. We all come with some ideas of God. Allow those ideas to be shaped around Jesus. That is the real challenge of New Testament Christology.⁵

And it is the challenge for evangelism. On Christ the King Sunday, the anthem in our

church began *Christ the Image*, *Christ the Dawning* and ended with *Christ the glory*, *Christ alone*. It didn't sound subversive in the singing; but as I heard the anthem, then re-read the gospel according to Colossians, I realized again how personal, how corporate, and how cosmic is its reach. It is *so personal* in our beginnings as we receive Christ: "He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins ... As you have received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to live your lives in him" (Col 1:13,14,2:6). It is *so corporate* in our belonging, as we are joined to his church: "He is the head of the body, the church, the firstborn from the dead" (Col 1: 18). And it is *so cosmic* in its transforming power: "Through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross" (Col 1:19). To quote Tom Wright again,

The gospel is not how to escape the world; the gospel is that the crucified and risen Jesus is the Lord of the world. And that his death and Resurrection transform the world, and that transformation can happen to you. You, in turn, can be part of the transforming work. That draws together what we traditionally called evangelism, bringing people to the point where they come to know God in Christ for themselves, with working for God's kingdom on earth as it is in heaven.⁶

On a corner in Victoria, Canada, last summer I met and spoke with 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 churchgoing parents on the Canadian prairies. "The most creative thing they do is to watch television." She thought their god was too small. "But, 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 Hopkins' 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. Then I was able to tell 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.

Could we perhaps put the gospel into poetry for the Leyanas we meet? As Charles Williams said, God is a poet, the world past and present is his poetry, and the words of our lives the lines of his poem. And long before Williams, Paul saw us as God's *poiema*, God's creative work, part of the great master poem God is writing (Eph 2:10).

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?⁷

There, Leyana, is creation, and fall, grace and salvation—and, in the final reading, great joy or great loss. The gospel is not any one formula—or any number of them. 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.

“More broken than we can imagine, more loved than we could hope”

Tim Keller is senior pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church, meeting at Hunter College in New York City, an urban, upper middle class, and well-educated congregation with Sunday attendance of four thousand five hundred. Diverse in makeup—forty percent Caucasian, thirty-five percent Asian, and twenty-five percent African-American and other—its age span is from college students to those in their sixties. Many have had churched backgrounds, but the church also draws many intellectual skeptics.

Keller blends an exegetical style of biblical preaching and an ability to articulate the Christian worldview in a pluralistic culture. For him the gospel “is the good news that through Christ the power of God’s kingdom has entered history to renew the whole world. When we believe and rely on Jesus’ work and record (rather than ours) for our relationship to God, that kingdom power comes upon us and begins to work through us.” He seeks to incorporate both evangelism and discipleship in every sermon. Rather than preaching biblical principles to be obeyed—“speaking to the will,” or evoking sentimental convictions—“speaking to the emotions,” Keller seeks to “preach to the heart” by exposing and breaking down the distorted motivational heart structures of his listeners. 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. For Keller, the story of the two sons illustrates 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.”

Keller’s style is casual, like a conversation with an audience. He disarms skeptics because he asks and addresses their difficult questions before they can verbalize them. He holds a question and answer session after each service to talk more about the sermon. Yet he expects people to be changed, not because of his style, but because the gospel 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.” That latter note may seem surprising. But surely it lends a “welcoming respect” to the invitation, subtle but present in every sermon, inviting believers and nonbelievers alike to embrace the gospel wherever they may be in their journey to God.⁸

Iconoclasts, Iconographers, and Icon-Bearers

If Christ is the image, then as evangelistic preachers we will be both *iconoclasts* who confront (shattering false images, as Moses ground to pieces Aaron’s golden calf)

and *iconographers* who communicate (holding up Christ as that true image of God and humanity), with images that both “sting and sing” (Donald Carson). But then we ourselves have a calling as *icon-bearers*, letters from Christ, mirrors reflecting his glory, common clay pots holding precious treasure, servants who through the Spirit of the Lord are being transformed into his own image.

What are they seeing? The Gospel Made Visible

Lillian is an Atlanta lawyer, part of the “boomer” generation, formerly senior warden at her Episcopal church. We talked about her friends who are not (yet) committed to Christ. “If you invited them to church,” I asked her, “what would you want them to see and sense?” She responded, “Two of our preachers have been storytellers. Another was more of a poet. They preached well. But most of all I would want my friends to hear a preacher who believes at the cellular level what they are preaching. And they would want to hear and feel a full welcome.”

The credibility of the message is so closely tied to the authenticity of the preacher who preaches, and the congregation who hears. In the first recorded evangelistic sermon of the early church “Peter stood up *with the eleven*, raised his voice and addressed the crowd” (Acts 2:14). Peter did his part. He stood up and raised his voice. But there were eleven others standing with him. Peter gave voice to the community. And people paid attention not just because of Peter’s powerful words, but because of the community’s authentic faith: “All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own...With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of Jesus, and much grace was with them all” (Acts 4:32-35).

There was a certain quality of life among the early believers that demanded an explanation, made observers ask, “What’s with these people?” So Peter’s pentecostal sermon was an explanation. “These people are not drunk. They are filled and flowing over with God’s Spirit.” Evangelism, in this sense, means “provoking the question”—and preaching is answering that question.

A good contemporary example is Sanctuary Covenant in Minneapolis. It has become a community committed not simply to proclaim the gospel with their mouths, but to live the gospel in service to the community around. Pastor Efrem Smith believes that the gospel must be present in everything we do, and proclaimed not just as the promise of eternal life, but as the liberating power of God’s Spirit to transform our lives now. I imagine him, like Peter, standing to preach, raising his voice, and his “*Eleven are standing with him*”!

“The Good News Is not Distant”

Smith is senior pastor of Sanctuary Covenant, a three-year old church plant which seeks to be an urban, multi-ethnic, relevant, holistic, and Christ-centered community serving North Minneapolis. Over half of the worshipping community of eight hundred is aged nineteen to thirty-three, and the church’s multiethnic makeup reflects the community. To those who listen to Pastor Smith, one word comes to mind: passion. No one could leave sanctuary without sensing his passion for the hope of the gospel. Smith says, “If there is hope for this world, it should be found in the church.”

On a Sunday morning in November, Smith declares that the gospel speaks to our lives now as well as our eternal lives. As he puts it, “How many kids have to die, while

we go home and we are still talking about churchy stuff? How many homicides have to happen before we stop playing church and be the kingdom of God in the streets? Kids are dying, and we are in church.” As he calls for people to be prayed for at the end of the sermon, many come forward and allow members of the church to pray for them, for healing, for a reconciled relationship with God, for a passion and a purpose in their lives.

Later, at a small café in the neighborhood, he speaks again about the power of the gospel to change lives. “The good news is not distant,” he says. “We live in the good news daily. Through an intimate relationship with God we have the opportunity to play a role in the drama known as the good news.” I remember his Sunday sermon: “The church must not merely be about Christian education, but about Christian formation. We must be on a continuing journey of being transformed by the Holy Spirit into Christ-likeness.”

He believes that one must have a “wholistic” understanding of the gospel for that to become a reality. One cannot simply see the gospel as the promise of eternal life, although it is that. One must also understand the gospel as the liberating power of God’s Spirit to transform our lives here and now. If someone has stated their belief in Jesus as God’s Son sent to reconcile the world to God but cannot afford to feed themselves or their family, how is that good news? For Smith, the gospel is both a future reality and a present reality, and it must be preached that way.

Smith’s passion is the same on a Tuesday afternoon as it was on Sunday morning, and that is why so many people are coming to hear God’s Word spoken by him. Listening to Smith makes me believe that the gospel really can change lives and change this world. I am moved to want to serve the people of the city of Minneapolis and declare the passionate gospel. And I get the feeling that the other eight hundred people here at this church do, too.⁹

What are they sensing? The Gospel Made Credible and Authentic

“My name is Bill, and I’m an alcoholic.” My friend Bill has been a member of Alcoholics Anonymous since his early teens. From my own early teens I was one of the youngest leaders of Youth for Christ. Bill and I have spoken together at outreach sessions, telling our stories from 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 thirty years or thirty days. They all know they need God (as they understand him) and each other. Realness counts.¹⁰

So it’s striking that when I asked people of different ages what would make an evangelistic preacher effective, one single 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.”

“Billy Graham and our Presbyterian pastor were both so real. You felt they really believed what they were saying.” That’s from a couple who have both been elders in their church, and leaders in a Graham crusade. “People are attracted to transparency, authenticity, integrity, humanness. They want to know that Jesus makes a difference now.” Those words come from a mentoring group of young evangelists from across North America and Europe I met with recently.

Graham Johnston, a young American who was part of my evangelistic team, now pastors at Subiaco Church of Christ in Perth, Australia. Preaching in the *very* unchurched Aussie culture has taught him a lot. For one thing, he uses story regularly in his preaching and has learned much about storytelling from filmwriters. But by far the most important quality in reaching the unchurched, he has found, is the trust factor. He believes the attitude of the church members is, “We invite our friends because we trust the way Graham Johnston talks about the faith.” He sees authority in a postmodern culture coming 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 answers to people,” he explains. “That is much more of a modernity model. I see my evangelism 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 belief or 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.” This dialogue approach, rather than a command form, is what Johnston commends.

Johnston gives the telling example of a young woman, a recovering heroin addict who walked into church one Sunday. At the end of the service she came to him and said, “You need to know I’m an atheist. I don’t believe any of this rubbish.” Johnston responded, “It took a lot of courage for you to come here, Becky.” 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 Johnston’s sermons and told the congregation, “I came here as an atheist. Now I’m baptized. And I really love Jesus.”

If authentic evangelism is, as D.T. Niles has said, “one beggar telling other beggars where to find bread,” we need to preach first to ourselves. Writer William Stegner told an interviewer who asked how he made his stories believable, “The first job is to convince yourself, the second is to convince the reader. If you do the first, the second more or less follows.” When we preach out of an awareness of our own humanness and hungers, despairs and hopes, then people by God’s grace may sense in us a holy humanness—and humor.

“God Does Allow U-Turns”

Neely Towe has been senior pastor at Stanwich Congregational Church in Connecticut since 1989. Sunday attendance has nearly doubled in addition to birthing a nearby church offering a contemporary style to reach a younger population.

You can tell a lot about a church (and its leadership) from its bathrooms. Stanwich Congregational Church has great bathrooms. They’re brand new—and they have style. The ladies’ room is beautifully decorated, and the inside of every stall door is adorned by a Scripture verse: “You know when I sit and when I rise ...” (Psalm 139:2). The message is clear: Stanwich Church, for all its elegance and tradition on Connecticut’s “Goldcoast,” is a place where people are free to laugh and be themselves!

Neely Towe’s flock has become accustomed to hearing Scripture communicated through the often-comical events of everyday life. A humorous commentary on frustrations with the highway system leads into “God does allow U-Turns.” Says a long-time member: “Neely’s not bashful about sharing situations where she’s been wrong. She shows where God has brought her back to the fold and empowers people

to do the same.”

Towe’s presence and mannerisms all speak volumes. She (and the God she represents) is approachable, loving, and trustworthy. She will interrupt a sermon to make sure an elderly congregant can hear her, and wait patiently before starting worship until everyone has a seat.

God’s unmerited love and the hope through a relationship with Jesus Christ is particularly important for her success-oriented congregation of Wall Street traders, business tycoons, and the like, many of whom had no time for church before discovering Stanwich. “Everything is earned in this town. There is tremendous posturing and fear of failure, and loneliness,” Towe says. “The thought of a God who would love you for who you are and would be willing to die for you is extraordinary here.”

Having grown up in a church environment where talking about one’s faith was considered inappropriate, Towe relates well to her flock, many New Englanders with some church background, but who had never experienced a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. “Have you discovered the joy and the freedom of professing your faith personally with someone else? I was never raised to talk about it ...that is tacky! Well, fortunately someone knew better and said to me, ‘Neely, are you gonna live for Christ or for your friends? Make your decision.’ If you haven’t done that, be sure you say, ‘Yes, I do love you Lord, as best I can.’”¹¹

How are they responding? The Gospel Made Compelling and Accessible

After watching people come forward at Graham’s invitation, Thieliicke 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.

Why should we preach in our congregations as evangelists? Certainly not just to add numbers—though the Lord may do that, too. And not even just to do our duty. The only adequate reason comes in another of Paul’s breathtaking images: “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 Corinthians 5:20). Imagine! “God is making his appeal through us.” Preaching, true gospel preaching, is not our 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 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. Jesus can speak for himself. But he uses us and the “foolishness” of our preaching.

Increasingly I think of evangelism as “initial spiritual direction.” It is helping people to see God not as policeman or examiner but, as Simon Tugwell daringly says,

“the great seducer, wooing us so that his joy may be in us.” We help people to see the “clues” that God is already reaching out to them, through the beauty, the joys, and pains of their lives. We help them to acknowledge the resistances and attachments that keep them away. And then we help them, as Steve Hayner says, “take steps toward Jesus.” And our preaching can offer them opportunities to take those steps.¹²

My wife Jeanie walked in as I was writing this, and I asked her thoughts. “Why is it” she said, “that people want to be married publicly? Isn’t it because they love each other and want to make that known?” Of course, just as many people have gone to a Graham crusade expecting to go forward as they would at their own wedding. The form will differ, as Thielicke wrote to Graham, but the appeal must be there. And always we remember it is “God who is making his appeal through us.” The Holy Spirit is the evangelist. And we are the common clay pots in which he shares his treasure.

“Jesus is so good, and I have no choice but to surrender to him”

Darrell Johnson is Associate Professor of Pastoral Theology at Regent College, Vancouver, Canada. An ordained Presbyterian (PCUSA) minister, he has served congregations in Manila; Glendale, California; and Vancouver. For Johnson, all preaching is evangelistic or it simply is not preaching. Why? Because all preaching is about the Evangel, about Jesus and his gospel. Johnson works from the presupposition that whether it is a person’s first introduction to Jesus or the person has been attending church for a lifetime, everyone needs to be evangelized and re-evangelized.

At the heart of evangelistic preaching is Jesus Christ. In Scripture, we don’t have just one text that speaks toward evangelism, but the whole story speaks to the life of the Evangel, Jesus Christ. So a sermon about Jesus is by its very nature an evangelistic sermon. The lectionary title or category can refer to different themes of the Christian life, but it has to be grounded in Jesus. A sermon on holiness has to be about Jesus the Holy One. A sermon about stewardship has to be about Jesus our security. A sermon is not transformational unless there’s an encounter with Jesus in the midst of it.

From Johnson’s perspective in North America, there is too much “good advice” taught from the pulpit and not enough good news. Good advice, as biblically sound as it may be, has to be grounded in good news, or people won’t be able to live it.

Johnson attempts to incorporate three factors in his sermon preparation. The first is to think along theological terms. Whether the people sitting in the pews realize it or not, they were made by Christ, for Christ. So the message of Jesus Christ is not going to be strange to their souls. This leads to a pragmatic question: what kind of words will help people access this conversation that their soul is carrying on with the Holy Spirit? Often Johnson tries to picture five or six people that he knows and attempts to develop words, phrases, and images—“hermeneutical triggers”—that will help these people engage and access. The third factor, being culturally alert, helps to develop how the story of the Evangel will be conveyed at that particular place in that particular time. It conveys the sense that preachers know where their listeners live.

“Evangelistic preaching” generates an image of response preaching. Johnson hopes for a fresh sense of wonder at who Christ is and a fresh act of surrender, so that at the end of every sermon, a person’s heart is saying (although she or he may not be able to articulate it), “Jesus is so good and I have no choice but to surrender to Him,” whether for the first or hundredth time.¹³

Offering Space for Open Response

At the churches he served, Darrell Johnson 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 “space for response,” allowing the first-timer as well as the hundredth-timer to engage with the claims of Christ.

Crisis times especially nurtured this expectation. When Princess Diana was killed and the Hollywood community was shocked, many came to church at Glendale Presbyterian. “Your heart may be breaking,” he said. “We have a whole team to pray with you.” And he invited people at the end of the service to come for prayer.

He also offered “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 at the conclusion of a sermon he would invite people to “Put your hands on your knees, palm down, and then if you are wanting to know Jesus raise them slightly.”

After Communion by intinction he might say, “You want to respond to God but don’t know what to do. You may be here concerned for a loved one who needs the healing touch of Jesus, or perhaps you do. After you partake, Jim or Joe will be here to pray with you.” “Even the staunchest Presbyterian elder,” notes Johnson, “won’t object to the invitation to have someone pray for someone they love!”

In the bulletin would be an invitation: “If you are here and need prayer, or a loved one does, or if you need prayer for stress or healing, or you want to know Jesus, come at the end and we will talk.” Again, open response becomes no big idea, nothing unusual. I asked Johnson how he came up with these ideas. “I prayed,” he said, “Lord, what can we do to offer safe places for people to respond?” Not a bad idea: to pray about it! And to use our baptized imaginations.

Reflecting on Johnson’s suggestions, I wonder what would it be like if we actually allowed two minutes of silence after the preaching is done? Some folk might be very uncomfortable, for silence too can be subversive in a culture bombarded by images and sounds. Who knows what God might say to people in the silence! Or who says invitations must be extended only at the end? One pastor occasionally in the middle of a sermon will pause, explain the meaning of repentance and faith, and invite folk to respond in quiet prayer right then. If we are alert to the nudgings of the Spirit we may invite in more ways and at more times than we have imagined! The forms will differ, as Thielicke wrote to Graham, but the appeal should be there, God making his appeal through us. And 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?¹⁴ It’s the staying power of Christ that counts. A final observation from Thielicke to Graham is worth noting, and counting on:

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.

Notes

1. Excerpts from a letter to Billy Graham from Helmut Thielicke, August 23, 1963.
2. Henri Nouwen, *Preaching and Ministry*.
3. Rick Richardson, *Reimagining Evangelism: Inviting Friends on a Spiritual Journey* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 121.
4. Brian J. Walsh and Sylvia C. Keesmaat, *Colossians Remixed: Subverting the Empire* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2004). They believe “The primal responsibility of Christian proclamation is to empower the community to reimagine the world as if Christ, and not the powers, were sovereign.” (84-85).
5. N.T. Wright, “Mere Mission,” in *Christianity Today* 51, no. 1 (January 2007): 39-41. “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.”
6. Ibid.
7. This “poem” formulation is my adaptation of one way the Sri Lankan evangelist, D. T. Niles, presented the gospel: “God made you: you are responsible finally only to him. God loves you: he sent his Son to tell you so. Christ died for you: no one truly comes to himself until he can look at the cross and say: ‘I did that.’ You are going to God: that will be great joy for some, but it will be terrible for others.”
8. Contributed by David Drake. For more on Tim Keller’s preaching go to [https://www.gordonconwell.edu/ockenga/store/series/""](https://www.gordonconwell.edu/ockenga/store/series/) “Preaching to the Heart.” For sermons, go to http://sermons.redeemer.com/store/index.cfm?fuseaction=category.display&category_ID=11.
9. Contributed by Michael Binder. For more about Efreem Smith’s preaching go to <http://www.sanctuarycovenant.org/sermons/index.htm>.
10. Bill and I spoke as a team at an AA meeting, as part of an “affinity group” evangelism outreach with churches in Ottawa, Canada. This cooperative outreach brought teams of communicators to the city to speak at two dozen or more breakfasts, lunches, dinners, coffees, each aimed at a particular segment of the community: engineers, physicians, military, bereaved parents, cancer patients and many others. This “affinity group” approach can be particularly effective, at low cost, and building on already established relationships so that people can invite their friends to a non-threatening setting to encounter a presentation that relates to their life situation. Dr. Lon Allison, director of the Billy Graham Center at Wheaton College, Illinois has a team that can give guidance in “affinity group” evangelism.
11. Contributed by Barbara Cannistraro. For more about Neely Towe’s preaching. Go to http://www.stanwichchurch.org/new/sermons_current.html, “Neither Do I Condemn You” (John 8:1-11), and “Prepare the Way of the Lord” (Luke 3:18).
12. For more on evangelism as spiritual direction see Ben Campbell Johnson, *Speaking of God: Evangelism as Initial Spiritual Guidance* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991).
13. Contributed by Chris Kim. For more about Darrell Johnson’s preaching, go to www.djohnsononline.com or <http://www.tenth.ca>. See also “What Have We Gotten Ourselves Into?” (sermon preached January 8, 2006 at Tenth Avenue Alliance Church; available at www.tenth.ca).
14. I thank my young preacher friends, Michael Binder, Barbara Cannistraro, David Drake, and Chris Kim for their part in preparing these thoughts and writing the preacher profiles.