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### Contact and Conflict: Keys to Communicating the Gospel Through Mass Media

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C O N T A C T   A N D   C O N F L I C T

Keys To Communicating the Gospel  
Through Mass Media

Harold Straughn

## P R E F A C E

This report was the basis for a lecture on the use of mass media on campus. It was given at the 1968 International Campus Evangelism Seminar December 27-30 in Dallas. Most of the ideas were taken from a stimulating book by James E. Sellers, The Outsider and the Word of God: A Study in Christian Communication (Abingdon Press, 1961). Dr. Sellers is a professor of theology at Vanderbilt, but has experience and college training in radio, television, and newspapers, both religious and secular. Those who would pursue the issues raised here are urged to consult Sellers' work.

Harold Straughn

## C O N T A C T    A N D    C O N F L I C T

### Keys To Communicating the Gospel Through Mass Media

#### PART I.    AN EXPLANATION OF "CONTACT" AND "CONFLICT"

##### A. A Parable

In Naples, a 39-year-old priest named Mario Borelli drew the assignment of working with the scugnizzi, vagrant urchins who lived as pimps, petty smugglers, pickpockets, and robbers of besotted tourists.

Defeat stared at him from the first. These rock-hard teenagers would never come near the Church. And a priest to them was simply one more representative of a society that hated them. If the scugnizzi would not come to the church, Father Borelli decided, the church would have to go to them. The problem: how to communicate a message of mercy and concern, without repelling them with religious garb and language?

The young priest removed his clerical garb, put on dirty street clothes, joined the gang as another homeless drifter. In time the gang members came to accept and trust him. One day the man appeared at a usual spot, only now he was dressed in clerical robes and asking them to follow him to church. At first none of the scugnizzi recognized him. Then their faces registered astonishment. After some hesitation, a number followed him.

##### B. Point of Contact

This parable reveals the two stages necessary for communicating the gospel. The young priest first established a point of contact with the outsiders. Then upon this point of contact he established a point of conflict, a crisis in which the outsiders had to make a decision for or against him and all that he stood for.

To communicate the gospel today, a point of contact must be found between those who proclaim the gospel and those who are alienated from it. Where can we find such points of contact? It is an urgent yet difficult search.

1. Religious terminology is not a point of contact. American society is a mixture of Christian and pagan values. You mention Jesus Christ, and millions think of the countless dime-store pictures of Jesus, weak and helpless. You mention the Bible and an unknown book of lore, used sentimentally and superstitiously emerges in many minds. You talk about becoming

a member of the church, and some will begin figuring how it will help their business. A Woolworth Jesus, a horoscope Bible, a profit-motive church membership are not points of contact between the proclaimer and the outsider. In fact, they are concepts which have to be removed and replaced before contact with the gospel can take place. As Kierkegaard said, the gospel will appear to be taking a man's religion away from him. To use religious terminology without differentiating the biblical from the popular definition gives a false assurance that the religion as held by the outsider is the one the proclaimer is talking about.

2. The point of contact is found in man's basic anxieties. The solution lies in those areas of life where all men have a concern and where the gospel has a word to speak. All men have anxieties. Each man has a concern with his own time to die. He has anxieties over history, "what the world is coming to." The latest fads either fascinate or repulse him. He has a troubled sense, sometimes vague, sometimes acute, over his relations with his fellow man: the problems of nation, of race, of groups, of families, of his own place and vocation in society. He likes to find out causes for things-- and often he will perk up to hear what claims to be an "in-depth" or "behind-the-scenes" report. He pays attention to a medicine that promises to get at the causes of his ailment, to a magazine that promises to get at the hidden background, the full story. He is concerned with adding substance to his life, and reads and talks about health and suffering, wealth and poverty, social acceptance and rejection, security and risk-- all of these in the most personal and concrete terms as they manifest themselves in his life. Time and space, causality and substance-- these are the terms a philosopher might use to sum up our anxieties. And there is scarcely a single concern of man that cannot become a point of contact for something deeper, more meaningful, more ultimately grounded in the purposes of God.

### C. Point of Conflict

The second part of the task of proclaiming the gospel requires us to turn the point of contact into a point of conflict, a point where a man sees himself as God sees him, a point where a man struggles with God and with himself, to emerge in penitent obedience.

1. Religious terminology is not a point of conflict. The most obvious way to bring about a point of conflict is to talk about hell and judgment, command and obedience, sin and salvation. So it would appear. But such religious terminology is full of peril, for at least three reasons. Religious terminology first of all tends to create a point of conflict before a point of contact has been established. The roadside sign crying "Where will you spend eternity?" fails for precisely

precisely this reason. (Now you can understand why such tactics rightfully embarrass even the believer.) Religious terminology secondly leads to reassurance instead of to conflict. Many people are around who like to hear the language of judgement poured on the ears of others, but who themselves have never faced a real religious quest of their own. Yet as we all know, everybody talkin' about heaven ain't goin' there. Thirdly, religious terminology can lead to needless and even erroneous conflicts instead of confrontation with God. Reliance on the language of divine judgement to bring about a point of conflict has caused the sophisticate to sneer and the simple person to become terrified, without confronting either of them with the promises of God. If we are to establish a true point of contact that will lead to a true point of conflict, these warnings regarding religious terminology ought to weigh heavily on us.

2. The point of conflict is found in decision-producing situations. Shorn of our customary terminology, we may feel lost in reaching people with the message of God. In reality, we will be in a better position than ever because we will be forced to turn to language which is understandable by the outsider equally with the proclaimer. We have noted that the basic anxieties of man are the ideal point of contact between the outsider and the proclaimer. These same basic anxieties can lead to the most genuine point of conflict. Anxiety about death (contact) leads to the claim of resurrection and eternal life (conflict). Anxiety about "what the world is coming to" (contact) leads to the claim of what has come to the world (conflict). Fascination or repulsion with the latest fads leads to the claim about "putting on Christ." Concern for the causes of events leads to a claim of the divine scheme of redemption. Anxiety about health and suffering leads to a claim of the connection between physical and spiritual illness. Just as the basic anxieties of man can all become points of contact, all the basic Christian affirmations can become points of confrontation, conflict, decision, and penitent response.

## PART II. AN APPLICATION TO THE MASS MEDIA

Radio, television, and print are the best ways that large groups of people can be reached at once. A knowledge of what mass media can and cannot do becomes a great power for communicating the gospel. Use of mass media is imperative. At the same time, incorrect use is worse than no use at all. Many groups have discovered mass media. Some religious programs are naive sermon-readings, with little attention to the skills that can increase the return from the seed invested. Others may go to the opposite extreme of relying on technique instead of content with the consequence of obstructing the message instead of clarifying it. There are ways of finding, as it were, a happy medium.

### A. What You Will Get with Mass Media

When you decide to employ the presses and cameras of the world to carry the gospel, you become identified in the public mind with the general image of mass media. That impression is one first of all of objectivity, verifiability, authenticity. There is a tone of optimism and sincerity, of earnestness and realism that pervades the mass media, whether in a news broadcasts or commercials or the programs themselves. These virtues are not accidental. Millions of dollars are spent to find just the right facial expressions, color combinations, and dramatic plots to assure these virtues. And that brings us to the second point. There is a widespread grain-of-salt usage from the skeptical millions who know enough about the attempts to wriggle into his psyche to be on guard and to expect overstatement and paid sincerity. It's enough to cause him to be skeptical of preachers even.

There is another kind of trick-and-treat that mass media bestows, which has even more effect on religious broadcasting. Mass media is able to turn faith into entertainment. And it can turn entertainment into faith. The motion picture media comes quickly to mind. "The Ten Commandments" uses the terminology of faith, but it rarely rises above the level of entertainment. When Moses stands before the burning bush, the viewer is more likely to wonder how they got that bush to look like it was burning than he is to be led to the unapproachability and holiness of God. On the other hand, a person who goes to be entertained by "The Graduate" or "The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter" to name 1968 examples comes out with considerably more to deal with than he bargained for. The primary impact of "The Ten Commandments" is spectacle and romance. "The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter" on the other hand deals with every person's alienation from other people. It is a point of contact, for those who have seen it, for a comparison of the ministry of the deaf-mute with the ministry of Christ.

What will you get with mass media? Quite often the very opposite of what you think you are getting.

### B. If Religious Terminology Is So Risky, What Then?

What then? Start with secular terminology. Then fill them with Christian content. It is an ancient practice. The New Testament writers did it all the time.

One term in common use among first-century Greeks was logos, referring to the eternal principle of reason they believed was present throughout the universe. The gospel of John makes a point of contact through this term. He agrees with the Greeks that the logos was an eternal, universal principle ("In the beginning was the logos"). But he turns the point of contact into a point of conflict a few lines later when he says this logos became a man ("the logos became flesh and dwelt among us"). Even though today the idea of logos is no longer a commonly accepted idea, and is not the point of contact with the world

that it was in the first century, there remain many other such points of contact where secular terms can become filled with biblical meaning.

A contemporary religious artist has used billboard slogans, movie and song titles, and other popular ideas for points of contact. The artist creates posters which cause viewers to do a double take. "Wonder makes strong bodies," reads one. Another points to the deeper meaning of the Beatles' song, "Love Is Here To Stay and That's Enough." Another portrays the familiar yellow triangle urging us to "Yield." One of the artist's followers came up with "Fly the Friendly Skies United." Students in every part of the globe have clamored for these posters to decorate their rooms, and also to stimulate thoughtful conversation.

In another medium, the Southern Baptist Hour on TV a few years ago had a series of dramas about various modern situations: a teenager who ran away to a hippie-type colony; a businessman who played an investment too conservatively and lost everything while his competitors made a fortune; a scientist who made test after test with varying results until one day a test found a solution that proved a great medical breakthrough. Only after viewers were thoroughly involved in the action did the script begin to reveal that they were being confronted with the message of Jesus' parables of the Prodigal Son; the Talents; and the Sower.

An advertisement last year in the University of Texas campus newspaper bore the single question: "DOES IT BOTHER YOU TO SEE INNOCENT PEOPLE SUFFER?" Below in smaller letters was what only a few readers would recognize as the address of one of the Protestant student centers, along with a date and time. Was this a meeting to organize on behalf of the poor? A lecture on the problem of evil? Some other possibility? Unmistakably, the question established a point of contact that could have led to a confrontation with basic Christian beliefs about suffering, evil, and sin.

### PART III. THE MOST EFFECTIVE USE OF THE CONTACT/CONFLICT PRINCIPLE

Now comes the most important and most difficult element in communicating the gospel through mass media. The essence of the gospel is an historical event, something that happened. God came down and dressed in our scugnizzi rags, "taking the form of a servant" (Phil. 2:5). He did not remain in heaven preaching words or handing down laws. So today communication of the good news is most effective in acts, in events, not in words alone. There is truth in the homely epigram, "Your life may be the only sermon some people ever hear."

When we communicate the gospel through mass media, we must become more conscious of events and less dependent on long sermons. Our concern must be more with the message and less with the messenger; more with real situations and less with



abstract propositions; more with live involvement and less with remote pronouncements.

The ideal way to use mass media is for live coverage of significant events in which a point of contact can be established and a point of conflict produced. All the electronic wizardry of the age, and all the circuitry of the earth is available free of charge if the point of contact involves enough people to convince the mass media industry to act.

To date, only a very few events involving New Testament Christians have stimulated much coverage.

In October 1967, Dr. William S. Banowsky, then a minister in Lubbock, Tex., engaged in what was advertised as "A Clash of Philosophies" with the religion editor of Playboy magazine. Live coverage was provided by area radio and television. Press wires carried news of the event. Thousands of copies of the transcription have been sold.

The contact/conflict principle can explain it. Dr. Banowsky made a definite point of contact: sex. Christians have something clear, urgent, and deep-seated to say about it. So does everybody else in the world. It was not a trivial point of contact. The clash and the contenders had a wide interest. Yet contact was made at a level where a confrontation with the claims of Christ could be made. Thus the event created a point of conflict, a place where a decision had to be made. Banowsky did not build on the popular attitudes about God, the Bible, and the Church; he appeared to take away the Christianity of some, the nominal, watered-down inherited faith, yet he offered to replace it with something genuine. In moving toward a point of conflict, the "Clash of Philosophies" built upon a carefully established point of contact. Suppose the speaker had inserted a sermon on sin and salvation (as some critics suggested afterward). He very likely would have created a point of conflict all right, but not the kind where a person can be brought to the gospel.

Most significant of all the factors, however is that it was an event, a real, live, concrete situation where everything is on the line. It is interesting to note that Dr. Banowsky subsequently has written a fuller, more thoughtful exposition of his point of view. Though offered at the same price and printed in the same format as the "Clash of Philosophies," the more thorough version has sold only a fraction compared with the "Clash."

#### PART IV. CONCLUSION: SOME QUESTIONS

The reader who has followed along this far ought to be ready to struggle with some very critical questions about presenting the gospel through mass media.

1) Are we establishing a genuine point of contact with the outsider? Or are we simply trying to "speak our piece" so we can say "we're on the air"?

2) Is the point of contact we are trying to make established on a level where the gospel has something to offer, and where the outsider already has a real concern?

3) Is it possible that the use of religious terminology is creating a point of conflict that drives the outsider away before a point of contact is made?

4) Is it possible that an emphasis on personalities (who in spite of all efforts at publicity remain comparatively obscure on the public horizon) is creating a point of conflict that passes over the outsider before a point of contact is made?

5) If a point of contact truly has been made, is it possible to move easily from it to a point of conflict, or is the contact so general or so trivial as to cause uneasiness and unnaturalness to bring up the claims of Christ?

6) Is the point of conflict in keeping with the gospel, or is it a conflict caused by an arrogant or ignorant attitude on our part, a conflict that stirs up only strife?

7) When a person rejects the gospel, does he understand what he is doing, or is he rejecting something he does not fully understand?

8) Is it possible for a message that is concerned with the basic anxieties of all men to be both more biblical and more effective in reaching large audiences than traditional religious terminology?

9) How many ways can we discover to favor live, "clash" events over remote, "one-sided pronouncement" programs?

10) Is it possible that insistence on confronting the audience with the plan of salvation in every contact ironically has the opposite effect of creating a point of conflict before a genuine point of contact has been established?

11) What about the tinge of skepticism that is a part of every mass media audience? Is this a barrier to creating faith and obedience? Can it be overcome?

12) Could a well-founded followup program, using the power of the personal approach, help to achieve the potential of mass media, as well as to help overcome its limitations?

Every present and future use of mass media for reaching people with the gospel would benefit by examination in the light of these issues.