

IMAGINATION AND DECLARATION OF THE GOSPEL

FOR THE BILLY GRAHAM CENTER AND MARION E. WADE CENTER EVANGELISM
ROUNDTABLE V “IMAGINATION AND THE GOSPEL: HARNESSING THE IMAGINATION TO
ENGAGE CONTEMPORARY CULTURE AND COMMUNICATE THE LIFE-CHANGING GOSPEL”

April 23-26, 2008

DR. LON ALLISON

The genesis for this Roundtable emerged gladly in discussions with some of Wheaton’s Lewisonians (my name for the likes of Drs. Chris Mitchell and Jerry Root). Chris directs the Wade Center, and Jerry serves on its Board. At the Wade Center, Wheaton College, the study of the lives and writings of 7 authors including C.S.Lewis, is pursued with near fanatical vigor.

The Billy Graham Center and the Wade Center first collaborated when the film, *The Lion, Witch and Wardrobe* was released. Together with a local church we sponsored the film’s release and ministry opportunities in Chicagoland. As all who attend the Roundtable know, the film had remarkable success. It followed the even greater world acclaim of the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy also released through film and new book editions. For most Christians these successes were welcome realities, a hopeful sign that the Gospel, driven through imaginative lenses, was reaching new vast audiences, beyond the normal means of local churches.

Yet, the Lewisonians were the first to suggest that Lewis and other Wade Center authors, particularly, Mac Donald, Chesterton and Sayers had spread the gospel widely, winsomely, and intentionally through their imaginative writings in previous generations. I have seen much of this work in Mac Donald's Scottish Highland novels, Chesterton's plays, and Dorothy Sayers passion play titled, *The Man Born to be King*, first aired on the BBC during Lent in the 1940s. These authors and may I dare say, "literary evangelists", clearly sought to communicate gospel truth into the heart of their cultures. Through them, the gospel broke loose from the confines of parish pulpits and into the dominant means of cultural communication (books, plays, radio) of their day.

Following these understandings, our Roundtable Director Rick Richardson, our Dean, Dr. Paul E. Larsen, and Dr. George Hunter began to plan this Roundtable seeking to encourage and enlarge the scope of "imaginative" gospel declaration through sermon and other forms asking the Wade Center authors to be our models.

In this Roundtable, Rick Richardson will in his introduction, give an overview of the Gospel as we teach it at Wheaton College and through the ministries of the Billy Graham Center. Dr. Chris Mitchell of the Wade Center will likewise present some thoughts on a definition of the Imagination, which I've learned is no easy trick. Without their work in front of me however, I will offer definitions to guide me as I present my essay on *Imagination and Declaration of the Gospel*.

I will define the Gospel as outlined in the Lausanne Covenant of 1974, paragraph #4 on the nature of evangelism. ***“Evangelism itself is the proclamation of the historical, biblical Christ as Savior and Lord, with a view to persuading people to come to him personally and so be reconciled to God”***. The Lausanne definition further defines the process of evangelizing, ***“to spread the Good News that Jesus Christ died for our sins and was raised from the dead according to the Scriptures, and that as the reigning Lord he now offers the forgiveness of sins and the liberating gift of the Spirit to all who repent and believe.”***

I take this definition to include the proclamation of the good news which is God’s means to regenerate souls, and to extend God’s Kingdom into every dimension of human existence, including all places where injustice and evil now operates. Such is the gospel or good news. Therefore, my point is to emphasize two elements. First, the gospel is verbal (Rom. 9:14, I Cor. 1:21-24). It is proclamation, meaning words, and requires language to make it comprehensible. I do not mean to exclude good works which must adorn and accompany the verbal message. But I/we do not believe the gospel is sufficiently expressed until without being verbal. Second, the gospel declares God’s desire and unstoppable plan to transform both *souls* and *societies*. The gospel was given to us primarily through a true story- History- and tells of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ at a precise time in human existence (Gal. 4:4). The meaning of that life and his acts is revealed through the whole canon of sacred Scripture.

I define Imagination as including, taking my cue from Ryken, ***“...a way of conceptualizing the relationship between art and life”***. ***He suggests that one way to***

define imagination includes our “image making and image perceiving capacity”

(Ryken p.61). I would go a bit further asking that the imaginative process include the expression of words and meaning through voice, emotion and body. I will emphasize, namely, that the imagination creates and when aligned with spoken art, describes images, pictures, stories, parables and concepts, etc. to present ideas. In the case of the Christian gospel this more importantly means to communicate true ideas.

My emphasis is on the verbal or oral declaration of the gospel through the imagination. My background fuses Homiletics (D.Min degree from Gordon Conwell, 1996), and Theatre Arts (Professional actor San Francisco, 1982-1989). In the arena of homiletics much has been written in the last two decades on the need for the imagination in preaching. Story or narrative preaching has found a ready audience in the West. Further, missiologists suggest the use of story and narrative has always been the best container for the gospel in the majority world (Steffen, 1996). I won't belabor or argue those points, as I hold and assume most readers and participants hold their merit. My work will rather, suggest a great need to improve not only the composition of narrative gospel preaching but even more, the effective delivery of it.

To do this I will use an historical mentor, George Whitefield the Oxford trained (Pembroke) 18th century evangelist. What many do not know is that Whitfield was a student of the theatre and well-trained thespian. Parallel with Whitefield, I will briefly overlay some of the present day theory and technique of theatre art known as the Stanislavsky “Method”. My purpose is simple- elevate the declarative capabilities of

verbal proclaimers of the gospel of Jesus Christ in the 21st century global community. Imaginative story and narrative driven proclamation centered on the stories and message of Scripture is effective, globally.

George Whitefield's ministry falls squarely in the era known as the first Great Awakening. Almost immediately upon graduating from Oxford, he began preaching Christ, which for him emanated from a deeply personal experience of the new birth while at University. Thus, his ministry falls in the long line of preachers focusing on the message of new life in Christ. In this he joined other lights from the era, namely, John and Charles Wesley, Issac Watts and others who would soon be called Methodists or Dissenters from the Church of England. Whitefield was a Methodist theologically, but never cut ties with the Church of England. Since their time, the gift of the evangelist has been seen as including this calling and proclamational capacity. An examination of Whitfield's sermons (only 63 were printed and of those 46 published before he was 25), displays a rather typical understanding of evangelistic preaching. He utilized the Scriptures with authority, and spoke to listeners as loved by God, and yet deeply marred by sin. He held to the doctrines of original sin and total depravity. His portrait of God included his love, and yet his justice. As a committed Calvinist, Whitefield spoke of God's election and irresistible grace. Thus, his appeal called upon sinners to respond to the God who was calling them.

But it was his way of communicating evangelical theology that set Whitefield apart from most of the other evangelists of his day. I call this his "declarative capacity". Mark Noll

comments on Whitefield's impact upon arriving in the American colonies (He would make 13 such trips between in less than 35 years), stating, "When he arrived in the colonies, he was simply an event" (Quotable Whitefield, Christian History, 1993).

What made Whitefield an event? First, his language was visual, emotive and sensory centered. Often listeners would shout out in response having been drawn into the drama of his speech. Once when speaking to a group of sailors, he said:

Well boys, we have a clear sky, and are making fine headway over a smooth sea, before a light breeze, and we shall soon lose sight of land. But what means this sudden lowering of the heavens, and that dark cloud rising from beneath the western horizon? Hark! Don't you hear the distant thunder? Don't you see those flashes of lightning? There is a storm gathering! Every man to his duty! How the waves arise and dash against the ship! The air is dark! The tempest rages! Our masts are gone! The ship is on her beam-ends! Then what next?"

The listener sailors rose from their seats as though scrambling from the crashing waves and shouted, "Take to the life boat, Sir. Take to the life boat." (Pollack, p. 239). Of course we can imagine his application to lives bound in sin and under the wrath of God. Only the lifeboat of Christ is sufficient to save the soul's drowning. In this we see how proclamational art differs from most theatre art. In theatre and film art, the audience is seldom part of the play or film. The audience is referred to as the "4th wall", present, but in the dark and not part of the action or attention of the actors. In proclamational art, the

audience is the “objective” or focus of the preacher/lead actor. Additionally, the proclamational actor is deeply aware of an invisible force communicating truth both through and in spite of his/her speech, the Holy Spirit (John 14:26, John 16:8-11).

An actor is trained to express imaginative language, whether it be the play or as in today’s world, film and television, with congruent emotion. Whitefield even as a young boy would come home from church and practice the sermons he’d heard. He had early aspirations for the pulpit. At the same time, he read and viewed plays and studied theatre art whenever allowed, though the 18th century stage was called by many, the church of Satan. Thus, according to Harry Stout, “he fused an amalgam of preaching and acting that held audiences spellbound” (Stout, p.xviii).

Evidently theatre art was in its own renaissance in the time of Whitefield. David Garrick, founder of the Drury Lane theatre in London, and others like him, elevated the actor’s professionalism and capabilities to new heights. Precision in emotion and physicality on the stage were honed to near perfection. An 18th century book on acting by Aaron Hill delineates 10 emotions or passions that if practiced to perfection would allow the actor to play any part. These were: joy, grief, fear, anger, pity, scorn, jealousy, hatred, wonder and love (Stout, p.9). Incidentally this skill, called emotive memory, is a major aspect of “method acting” today. The Russian acting professor, Igor Stanislavski, father of the “Method”, calls for intense emotional realism in the actor’s portrayal of any role. “The musical scale has only 7 notes, the sun’s spectrum only 7 primary colors, yet the

combination of those notes in music and those colors in painting are not to be numbered. The same must be said of our fundamental emotions” (Stanislavski p. 16).

Thus acting in the emotional sense, is not “acting”, but more, emotional reality (truth), for the actor. Whitefield had such capacity. Some of it was natural gift from the Creator God who called him at birth. But much of it was learned. Garrick, not a fan of Whitefield’s message was still enamored with his presentational powers. He is purported to have said that Whitefield could make people weep or tremble merely by pronouncing Mesopotamia. At another time he evidently voiced he would give 100 guineas to be able to say “Oh” the way Whitefield could say it (Mansfield, p.123).

In addition to this “inner life” or emotive understanding, Whitefield’s voice and physical movement compelled people to listen. Benjamin Franklin once estimated through crude but nevertheless scientific measurement, that Whitefield’s voice could carry well and be understood by 35,000 people in an outdoor setting (Stout p.90). But it was more than the loudness of his voice. It was the emotion that gave the voice multiple layers of color and shape. He could roar like a lion, and weep like a child and often did both within the same sermon. He used his body from head to foot to integrally move and express his emotion and meaning. Again Franklin commented that Whitefield’s voice and body had perfect modulation, emphasis and action. “Every accent of his voice, and every motion of his body, speaks, and both are natural and unaffected-...so natural a way, the product of art” (Stout p. 95). He likened it to a perfect piece of music (ibid. p.104).

Beyond the emotional power, and his voice and body in tandem, Whitefield displayed a well honed proclamational personality. First, he had learned from John Wesley the value of preaching extemporaneously and without notes. This gave him a sense of spontaneity of expression. He preached simply, meaning, not that he was simplistic, but rather that he had the capacity to be understood with smooth transitions between ideas. He was also full of joy and enthusiasm both in personal countenance and in public speech. He was humorous, often inserting quick wit and response to hecklers as well as serious listeners (Mansfield p. 243-246). He once said, "...a man the other day, was so persuaded of my riches, that he sent me word, if I did not lay thirty pounds in such a place, I should be killed as sure as I am alive; but...I'm alive yet". (He didn't have 30 pounds!). William Tennet, the famed scholar and revivalist upon hearing Whitfield uproariously laughing in an inner room wondered if God could use someone so happy (ibid. 244). In addition to these skills he was remarkably authentic revealing personal feelings and experiences. He wept easily. "You blame me for weeping, but how can I help it when you will not weep for yourselves though your mortal souls are on the verge of destruction" (ibid. 123).

To these he added his imaginative powers to text and brought the stories of Scripture from Abraham to Zaccheus from dusty aged history to 18th century England, Scotland, and the colonies. In his sermon on Zaccheus look and listen with your imagination to his words:

How glorious did the rich Zaccheus look today, when forgetting the greatness of his station, he ran before a pitiful, giddy mob, and climbed up a sycamore tree to

see an enthusiastic, preacher. But Zaccheus cares not for that...if he could but see who Jesus was, he did not value what scoffers said of him.

This is an example of how Scripture was to him not only a set of doctrines, "...but a dramatic script with a cast of characters" (Stout p. xx). Words like "Oh" and "Methinks" and "Alas" or "How" are verbal cues that his imagination is taking a text beyond the words on the page and into the orbit of the possible yet not specifically revealed (Mansfield p.198).

Thus in George Whitfield, we have an imaginative artist, combining roles of author and performer. His imagination was expressed through images including story, simile and metaphor. But beyond the crafting of words and unlocking their meaning, his imaginative artistry came out through his emotions, voice and body. I concur with Harry Stout who titled his biography of Whitfield, "The Divine Dramatist".

However, it would be shortsighted to limit this declarative capacity to Whitfield. Oswald Chambers, Pope John Paul II and many other clerics were given similar skills and training. Further, much of this proclamational art can be taught to almost all people desiring to communicate gospel truth more creatively and effectively. Fusing homiletics, evangel"ology" and theatre arts are the means. It is one of my core passions to exemplify and teach such skills. I agree with Fredrick Buechner who suggests our calling as preachers is to make God real through the sacrament of words, because, "the gospel is the tale too good to not be true" (Buechner p. 98).

We must give urgent consideration to this notion. The missional mandate from Jesus Christ (Luke 19:10/John 20:21) demands it. Further in a world where the written word is unknown-missiology informs us that up to 70% of the world are oral speakers and cannot read or write, the case can be made that oral delivery of gospel is the primary way most will receive and consider it (Christianity Today, March 2006, p.56f). Even in the developed world, images and orality driven through music, film, television and internet are the dominating formats for information and idea delivery.

Sources:

Allison, and Anderson, *Going Public with the Gospel*, Inter Varsity Press, 2003.

Buechner, Frederick, *Telling the Truth-The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy, and Fairy Tale*, Harper Collins, 1977.

Christianity Today, *Winning the Oral Majority*, March 2006.

Dallimore, Arnold A., *George Whitfield*, Crossway Books, 1990.

Mansfield, Stephen, *Forgotten Founding Father, The Heroic Legacy of George Whitfield*, Highland Books, 2001.

McClellan, Graydon E., *George Whitfield in the Port of Newbury*, essay, Feb. 1976.

Ryken, Leland, *The Christian Imagination, Revised*, Shaw Books, 2002.

Steffen, Tom A., *Reconnecting God's Story to Ministry*, Center for Organizational and Ministry Development, Biola, 1996.

Stout, Harry, S., *The Divine Dramatist*, Eerdmans, 1991.

Stanislavski, Constantin, *An Actor's Handbook*, Theatre Arts Books, 1963.