

# Speaking to Teenagers

HOW TO THINK ABOUT, CREATE,  
& DELIVER EFFECTIVE MESSAGES



Doug **FIELDS** + Duffy **ROBBINS**



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*Speaking to Teenagers: How to Think About, Create, and Deliver Effective Messages*  
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# Table of Contents

<b>Cheering You On</b>	10
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## **Section 1: How to Think about Effective Messages**

Chapter 1	“The Stakes Have Never Been Higher”	14
Chapter 2	Building Bridges That Connect	24
Chapter 3	God: The Bridge-Builder	32
Chapter 4	Who You Are Speaks Louder Than What You Say	44
Chapter 5	Listening to the Audience	62
Chapter 6	A Good Message Starts with Thoughtful Planning and Careful Preparation	80
Chapter 7	Gathering Material to Make Your Prep Easier	94

## **Section 2: How to Create Messages That S.T.I.C.K.**

Chapter 8	Study: Improve Your Content and Increase Your Confidence	106
Chapter 9	Think: Take Time to Reflect on Your Audience and Content	122
Chapter 10	Illustrate: Add a Little Color to Your Messages	132
Chapter 11	Construct: Organize and Pull It All Together	158
Chapter 12	Keep Focused: Crafting for Clarity	184

## **Section 3: How to Deliver Effective Messages**

Chapter 13	Prep for Delivery: Making the Space Work for You	198
Chapter 14	The Wonder of Delivery: Speaking to Birth New Life	212
Chapter 15	The Wonder of Delivery: Announcing New Life	226

## **Epilogue**

God Doesn't Need Flawless Communicators...Just Faithful Ones	236
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## **End Notes**

239
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# “The Stakes Have Never Been Higher”

**She looked to be in her early thirties.** (I’m guessing low 30s, in case she ever reads this.) She was one of 300 youth workers gathered for a weekend of training and encouragement at beautiful Camp Berea on Newfound Lake, New Hampshire. She approached me shyly, reservedly, almost the same way I’d approach someone like Billy Graham, Pope Benedict, Mother Teresa, or Jerry Garcia. And then, grabbing both of my hands, she looked into my face with this wonderful smile and said,

I heard you speak back in the early nineties, and I remember you spoke about “going the distance.” It was an amazing week, and it was the week I accepted Jesus into my heart. Now I have my own youth group, and I’m here learning how to help them grow in Christ. And I just want you to know, it all began with you that week back in Fort Collins, Colorado.

It was a pretty neat moment, at least for me—one of those perks that keeps a lot of us in youth ministry over the long haul. Seeing the fruit grow and mature from something we had the privilege of planting or watering several years ago is an amazing privilege, indeed a gift from God.

But in the midst of that moment of vivid encouragement, two other distinct thoughts immediately came to mind: *First, I knew good and well it didn’t all begin with me.* I was just one of many characters in the drama that was this woman’s life—one person who walked onto the stage, spoke from his heart, and made his exit. I knew the scene in Fort Collins was only part of a much larger drama being played out under the direction of a sovereign God who’d been at work in that teenage girl’s life through countless other relationships, circumstances, and longings, and (probably) lots of other Bible studies, messages, retreats, cabin times, and conversations.

As soon as she said it, I knew it didn't begin with me. And even more than that, I took satisfaction in the fact that, by God's grace, neither did it end with me.

But then came the second thought, just as clear and real as the first: *I was so humbled and grateful to God that the story included me.* I was stunned and amazed that God would use my small loaf of a few messages to encourage someone to eat the Bread of Life.

If you're like me, that's all you ever hoped for when you got into ministry: You knew you weren't going to play the starring role, you just wanted a piece of the action, and you hoped to "do something" for this God who has done everything for you. Thirty years of youth ministry have not dulled that sense of passion and gratitude in my life. If anything, the years have intensified it. Often, when I have conversations like the one above, the person will then step back and say, "Does that make you feel old?" And I say, "No, it makes me feel grateful."

## An Improbable Opportunity

This book is written for people who understand that type of gratitude. It's written for those of us who stand up on a regular basis and speak to a room full of teenagers (or maybe it's half full...or one-fourth full...okay, it's really two or three students whose parents made them attend) and share this amazing story of grace and gratitude, bad news and good news, sacrificial giving and joyful giving back.

Each week when we attempt to speak, we don't know exactly how it's going to work. We're not precisely certain how we're going to pull it off. We're not totally confident that we can make the play. But we're so grateful and so stunned that God has simply put us in the game. And we want to give it all we have.

This book is about helping grateful people bear witness to a great God, and doing that through something as mundane and miraculous as the spoken words of broken people. Whether those words appear in Sunday school, a summer camp, a Young Life club, a Friday night outreach, a pregame devotional, a midweek youth group meeting—or whether you're in ministry full time, part time, overtime, as a volunteer or maybe just a draftee who wasn't there the night they voted on who'd "work with the kids"—our intent is to help you carefully craft and speak words more effectively and with greater impact. We never know when that random teaching opportunity might end up being for one teenager the moment when it all begins. And even though we understand it doesn't all begin with us, we want to be faithful stewards of every opportunity God allows us to experience.

## Opportunities Missed

In his book, *Telling the Truth: The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy, and Fairy Tale*, Frederick Buechner describes a scene played out in thousands of churches every Sunday; a scene so commonplace we almost miss its real-life, high-stakes drama.

So the sermon hymn comes to a close with a somewhat unsteady amen, and the organist gestures the choir to sit down. Fresh from breakfast with his wife and children and a quick run-through of the Sunday papers, the preacher climbs the steps to the pulpit with his sermon in his hand. He hikes his black robe up at the knee so he will not trip over it on the way up. His mouth is a little dry. He has cut himself shaving. He feels as if he has swallowed an anchor. If it weren't for the honor of the thing, he would just as soon be somewhere else.

In the front pews the old ladies turn up their hearing aids, and a young lady slips her six year old a Lifesaver and a Magic Marker. A college sophomore home for vacation, who is there because he was dragged there, slumps forward with his chin in his hand. The vice-president of a bank who twice that week has seriously contemplated suicide places his hymnal in the rack. A pregnant girl feels the life stir inside her. A high-school math teacher, who for twenty years has managed to keep his homosexuality a secret for the most part even from himself, creases his order of service down the center with his thumbnail and tucks it under his knee....

The preacher pulls the little cord that turns on the lectern light and deals out his note cards like a riverboat gambler. The stakes have never been higher. Two minutes from now he may have lost his listeners completely to their own thoughts, but at this minute he has them in the palm of his hand. The silence in the shabby church is deafening because everybody is listening to it.<sup>1</sup>

Obviously, our audience is a lot younger than most of the folks who sit in those pews on Sunday morning, but the reality of their pain and need is just as real. There are hurting kids everywhere dying to know the good news of God's love. That's why there's no question that those of us who teach the Word of God are involved in a serious enterprise. "The stakes have never been higher," and "the silence is deafening."

The bad news: Our attempts to communicate the good news often fall way short of breaking through the silence. So often our speaking opportunities become messed-up and missed opportunities.

The data is pretty discouraging. UC-Irvine psychologist Thomas Crawford, along with his colleagues, visited the homes of people from 12 churches shortly before and after they heard a sermon opposing racial injustice. In the course of the second interview, subjects were asked whether they'd heard or read anything about racial prejudice or discrimination since the previous interview. In other words, let's forget for a moment about whether or not the sermon had any impact on people's attitudes about racial prejudice; let's just see if people remembered hearing it. The response was a little grim, to put it mildly. Only 10 percent spontaneously recalled that the sermon had been preached. When the remaining 90 percent were asked directly whether their preachers "talked about prejudice or discrimination in the last couple of weeks," more than 30 percent said they hadn't.<sup>2</sup>

We'd like to think the results would be different if the study had been done with our youth groups, and maybe they would. But a lot of us have enough experience to doubt that. Giving a *talk* is one thing; being given a *listen* is something else altogether. I remember starting out in youth ministry with my seminary degree in hand. I'd just successfully completed courses in hermeneutics and homiletics, and I thought, *I love Jesus. I love teenagers. How hard can this be?* But within a few months at my first church, I thought, *Gosh, I used to think I had the gift of teaching. Why has God put me with a bunch of kids who don't have the gift of listening?*

### Opportunities Blocked

The obstacles to communicating biblical truth are real. In their book *The Human Connection*, social psychologists Martin Bolt and David Myers give us a picture of just what it takes to give a talk or sermon and have it actually stimulate life-change in a teenager (Figure 1-1).

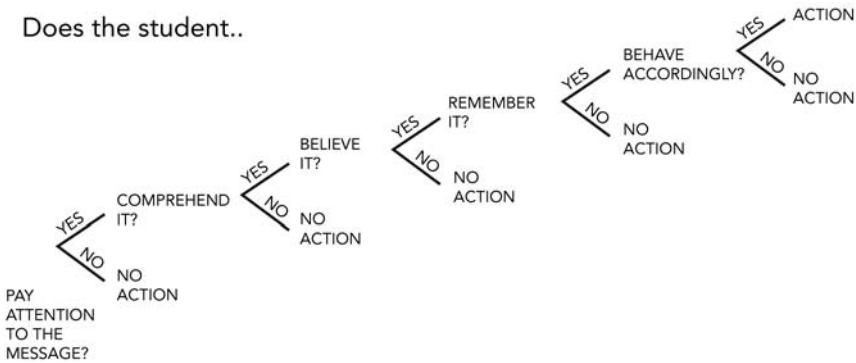


FIGURE 1-1 FROM MOUTH TO EAR TO HEART TO LIFE.  
THE OBSTACLES TO COMMUNICATION ARE REAL.

**1. First, we have to get them to pay attention to the message.** It's a Wednesday night, the crowd breaker and singing are finished, and you begin your message. Some students are intrigued, some are fatigued, some are excited, some are distracted, some appear to be in a totally other place, and some you wish (just a little bit) were actually in another place. How will you gain their attention?

One of the first issues in communication is that *exposure is not the same as attention*. For example, when we're exposed to a print ad, research demonstrates that on the average, only 44 percent of us actually notice it, only 35 percent read enough to identify the brand mentioned, and only 9 percent say we read most of what was written.<sup>3</sup>

And selective attention doesn't just happen with magazine ads. Remember God's words to the prophet Ezekiel: "Son of man, you are living among a rebellious people. They have eyes to see but do not see and ears to hear but do not hear, for they are a rebellious people" (Ezekiel 12:2).

**2. And if they hear it, we need to make sure they understand it.** It's the last night of camp, and you decide to open up and share your story—all of it—the good, the bad, and the ugly. You openly confess to a pattern of pretty raunchy sexual sin throughout your high school and college years. Students listen intently. Clearly, you have their attention. But while one student walks away from the session with a renewed commitment to the importance of sexual purity, another walks away feeling reassured that sexual sin is a normal part of growing up, that "everybody does it" (even my favorite youth leader), and that the decision for sexual purity can be postponed until he's spent a few more years experimenting and having fun. Moral of the story: What you meant as a painful confession, some teenagers heard as permission. In short, they heard you, but they didn't understand what you were teaching.

**3. Then even if they hear it and understand it, that doesn't mean they'll actually believe it.** Perhaps they listen to your story, feel moved by it, and even understand the implications of it, but their response at the end of your message is still, "Well, I can understand that it's true for *him*. But that doesn't make it true for me."

**4. Even if they believe the message in that moment, there's still the challenge of helping each of them to retain it in their active memory.** How many of us have had students who closed out the retreat weekend or the week at camp with what seemed like a genuine prayer of commitment, but by the time the vans unloaded back at church, or the students walked back onto their school campuses or got home among their same groups of friends, that genuine spiritual commitment got stockpiled and stored away with a whole bunch of other wonderful and genuine camp memories or buried under new friendship, calendar, and school commitments?

**5. And then, of course, there is the question of obedience.** Among those students who remember the challenge of last summer’s closing message or last week’s youth group talk, there is still the question of whether they intend to fulfill the promises or stick to the commitments they’ve made.

**6. And of the number who retain the message and have some measure of resolve to obey the message, there’s finally this question: Will they actually flesh out the decision by taking action?**<sup>4</sup> If question four points to retention, and question five points to intention, this question points us finally to real-life obedience.

Use the following chart to think about the ministry situation in which you most often teach a message to teenagers. How does this process play out with your students? Which points in the process are most difficult for that venue or setting? At what point in the process do you feel your ministry is strong? It may vary from meeting to meeting or event to event, but this might be a helpful exercise to get started.

1	2	3	4
Communication Challenge	What are we doing that might be leading students to say “Yes”?	What are we doing that might be leading students to say “No”?	What could we do to create a better “Yes” environment?
EXAMPLE: PAY ATTENTION	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Using media to gain attention;</li> <li>• Incorporating student testimonies to grab interest;</li> <li>• Trying to give attention to what part of the program leads into the message</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bad seating; some kids can’t see very well;</li> <li>• No relationships with students outside the meeting;</li> <li>• All the adult leaders sit together in the back of the room.</li> </ul>	
PAY ATTENTION			
UNDERSTAND THE MESSAGE			
BELIEVE THE MESSAGE			
REMEMBER THE MESSAGE			
DECISION TO HEED THE MESSAGE			
TAKE ACTION ON THE DECISION			

FIGURE 1-2 DO A QUICK SURVEY OF YOUR COMMUNICATION ENVIRONMENT.  
(Unfortunately, speaking to teenagers is not as simple as “We talk, they listen.”)

At this point in your reading, it might feel like a really good time to stop, close the book, and call your buddy about that telemarketing position selling timeshares in Zimbabwe. But that's why this is a good place to be reminded that *it doesn't all begin with you*. Like the apostle Paul, who gave his share of messages and faced his share of critics and discouragement, we can take heart in the fact that this whole communication deal begins with God, is empowered by God, and is sustained by God.

The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel that displays the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. For what we preach is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God's glory displayed in the face of Christ. But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed....*Therefore we do not lose heart.* (2 Corinthians 4:4–9, 16a; emphasis added)

At the very least this chart (Figure 1-2) reminds us that effective, holistic ministry has to extend far beyond just *speaking* to teenagers. Few of us make this trajectory of discipleship simply because we've heard a really effective youth talk. It just seldom happens. Creating and presenting good messages is only *a piece of the action*. But ministry experience tells us it can be an important and strategic piece of the puzzle that God uses to transform a teenager's heart.

Our goal in this book is to help you look squarely into the face of the challenges of column 1, discover some ways to strengthen what you're already doing in column 2, think about how you might want to work with the issues you face in column 3, and then give you some practical and doable strategies for column 4. We want to help you think about the way you plan, prepare, think about, study for, craft, and deliver your messages to teenagers.

## Aristotle, Youth Ministry, and Your Weekly Message

Before there was Peter and Paul, Augustine and Chrysostom, Wesley and Whitefield, Spurgeon and Lloyd-Jones, Graham and Lucado, Penn and Teller, Simon and Garfunkel—before all of those guys, there was a master of communication and philosophy named Aristotle (384–322 BC). His book *Rhetoric*,

written around the fourth century BC and subtitled *101 Fun and Wacky Ideas for Philosophers*,<sup>5</sup> was based on his 20 years of study under the tutelage of Plato (c. 427–c. 347 BC) and is still the most influential book on speaking, ever.

Aristotle began attending Plato's academy when he was 17 (imagine having Plato as your youth pastor), and he was heavily influenced by Plato's teaching about rhetoric, which we could summarize with these six statements:

1. Speakers need to know what they're talking about.
2. Speakers need to be able to handle logic.
3. Speakers must pay attention to the order and arrangement of their message.
4. Speakers must know something about human nature and be able to analyze and understand their audience.
5. Speakers should give attention to their style and delivery.
6. Speakers must have a high moral purpose.<sup>6</sup>

While there is still debate and dialogue about how these features play out in the modern and postmodern context, most communication theorists and rhetoricians agree that even some two millennia later, these ideas still have merit.

Aristotle reduced those six basic principles down to three big ideas about rhetoric. He argued that effective communication involved *ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos*.<sup>7</sup>

**Ethos refers to the speaker.** Every time a message is given, there has to be a messenger. *Who* that messenger is, is almost as important as *what* that messenger says. *Ethos* encompasses everything from the speaker's integrity and trustworthiness to the speaker's subject knowledge and delivery style.

In practical terms, this means our students are asking, *Can I trust you as an adult? As a Christian? You've got it all together, don't you? I'm dying in a pile, and I'm not sure I trust you or your easy answers. Do you really know what you're talking about?* In this book, we'll refer to this as the *ethos* or *ethical* dimension of the message.

**Pathos refers to the hearer.** Each time a message is given, it's addressed to a particular audience. *Pathos* is an appeal to the passions, needs, tendencies, and hopes of the audience. *Who* are the students with whom we hope to communicate? This is a student asking as he listens, *Do you really care about me?* We'll call this *pathos* or the *emotional* dimension of the message.

**Logos refers to the message itself.** Aristotle used this term to refer to the rational dimension of the message. Was it logical? Was it well conceived and constructed? Does the audience understand the message? This is where we give attention to delivery. How was the message “sent”? We’ll refer to this as *logos* or the *logical* dimension of the message.

Along with other great philosophers before us, our intention is to hang this book on the hook of these three big ideas. We’ll focus, first of all, on the ethical dimension of the message. Second, we’ll give some thought to the emotional dimension of the message. What do we need to know about our students to communicate effectively with them? And third, the bulk of this book will give attention to the third element of speaking, the logical dimension of the message. This is the *what* and the *how* of communication—*what* will we say and *how* will we say it?

The woman I met at Camp Berea on Newfound Lake had no idea of the amount of work that went into my journey of learning to create and communicate the messages she’d heard that weekend. And, to be honest, I don’t even know what I spoke about. But what I do know is that in that moment of time, God did what God does best—he took my humble efforts and combined them with his sovereign ways. God used the spoken word to illuminate his written Word, and a young woman’s life was eternally changed. Wow! Now, years later, she’s speaking to kids with the same anticipation, hope, and prayer that I had when God drew her close to him during that weekend two decades ago.

To the rational mind, this speaking thing doesn’t make sense—that someone could speak words to a group of people and somehow it could result in changed lives. But to a spiritual mind that understands God routinely turns water into wine, feeds a multitude with minimal food, and raises dead people back to life, impossible feels like the fingerprint of God. The greatest wonder is that we get to be part of the miracle!

We write this book with the confidence that God can do the impossible with the spoken Word. What we want to work on in the pages that follow is the possible part—the part that requires careful reflection, sound research, thoughtful planning, and hard work. We’re thrilled that you’ve allowed us to share this ministry with you. And we’re already looking forward to that day 5, 10, or even 20 years from now when someone comes up to us at a conference and says,

Hey, my youth leader read a book you guys wrote about how to speak to teenagers, and frankly, she said there were a lot of bad jokes in the book. But she also said it was really helpful, and she’s convinced it made her a better communicator. Well, I just want you to know that I was one of those teenagers she spoke to, and through those little talks she used to give to us, I heard the voice of God. So, thanks.

If someone does actually say that to us, rest assured it won't make us feel old, and it probably won't make us feel like good writers. What it will make us feel is grateful. Read well. The stakes have never been higher.