

BRIEF  BOOKS

GOSPEL SPEECH

A fresh look at the
relationship between every
Christian and evangelism

LIONEL WINDSOR



We all have a different relationship with speech. Some of us love it, some of us... not so much. For some it depends a lot on the context: speaking on the phone with a friend is perfectly enjoyable; speaking publicly in front of an audience is our worst nightmare. Some of us speak at a million miles an hour, while some of us have a slow and measured pace, choosing every word carefully. In many ways, speech really is a reflection of who we are as individuals.

But if our speech really is a reflection of who we are, and if being a Christian is a fundamental and even primary way we describe ourselves, should we expect gospel speech to be on our lips?

In this refreshingly different look at what the Bible has to say about evangelism and our speech patterns as Christians, Lionel Windsor shows the connection between faith and speech, and encourages us to confess the Lord Jesus with our lips.

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SYDNEY • YOUNGSTOWN

Gospel Speech

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INTRODUCTION

We all have a different relationship with speech. Some of us love it, some of us... not so much. For some it depends a lot on the context: speaking on the phone with a friend is perfectly enjoyable; speaking publicly in front of an audience is our worst nightmare. Some of us speak at a million miles an hour, while others have a slow and measured pace, choosing every word carefully.

In many ways, speech really is an intrinsic reflection of who we are as individuals.¹

It's not uncommon, for example, to hear it suggested that women speak considerably more words per day on average than men (20,000 vs 7,000 is the commonly cited statistic). Supposedly, talking

¹ A point Jesus makes in Luke 6:45.

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more is just part of a woman's nature. But this is not so, according to a study reported by *Scientific American*.² As it turns out, the average for men and women is basically the same.

Nonetheless, the same study did note that there was a big variation between participants. One man in the study averaged just 795 words a day, while at the top end of the scale another man averaged 47,000 words. I'm guessing those two guys had pretty different personalities, and it might be fun to play the game of guessing their respective professions: Monk vs auctioneer? Train driver vs telemarketer? Pastor on a Monday vs pastor on a Sunday?

It would be interesting to study a group of Christians, too, although not so much to study how many words they speak per day—I'm guessing it would be similar to the general population, notwithstanding the Bible's counsel for us to be "slow to speak" (Jas 1:19). Rather, it would be interesting to count how many *gospel words* they speak per day—words that tell of the gospel of the Lord Jesus and point others to his saving work on the cross and his life-giving resurrection.

² See N Swaminathan, 'Gender jabber: Do women talk more than men?', *Scientific American*, 6 July 2007 (viewed 5 August 2015): <http://scientificamerican.com/article/women-talk-more-than-men/>.

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For some Christians, perhaps even most of us, if such a study were done the number might be embarrassingly low.

For others of us, the number is low but there is little embarrassment. We've long since rationalized away any sense of guilt or failure: "I don't have the gift of being an evangelist"; "the Bible doesn't command me to speak of Jesus"; "I let my actions do the talking".

But if our speech really is an intrinsic part of who we are, and if being a Christian is a fundamental and even primary way we describe ourselves, then might we need to look again at what the Bible has to say about our speech patterns?

Perhaps it's time for a rethink and a fresh approach to the topic. Read on.

Ian Carmichael
Editor

1. ARE ALL CHRISTIANS COMMANDED TO EVANGELIZE?

Does God command every individual Christian to evangelize? Or is evangelism just a job for specially gifted individuals?

If you've been a Christian for a while, it's likely that these questions have popped into your head from time to time. You might remember an initial burst of enthusiasm for Jesus at some time in your life. Maybe you remember burning with a passionate desire to tell as many people as you could about the wonderful news of Jesus' death and resurrection. After all, this news had recently rocked your world and given you hope and life and meaning; why wouldn't you want others to know it? But by now, maybe, you're feeling a bit jaded. Of course,

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you acknowledge that the ‘gospel’, the message about Jesus, is quite important. But you’ve come to realize that you’re not really the kind of person who feels comfortable talking about Jesus to other people. Maybe you just feel ill-equipped. Maybe it’s not your personality type. Maybe evangelism just feels plain weird to you. Maybe you’ve had a few bad evangelistic experiences. Awkward moments. Maybe you’ve lost friends. Maybe you’re getting fed up with that vaguely guilty feeling that nags away at you whenever preachers tell you to evangelize. And so you might be asking: does God really want me to do this evangelism thing anyway? Does he actually command it anywhere?

In fact, if you go hunting in the Bible for commands to evangelize, you won’t find very much material. True, there’s the ‘great commission’ in Matthew 28:19-20. Jesus, having just risen from the dead, says to his disciples, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations”, and then adds: “teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you”. By applying the strict rules of logic, you can reason that “everything I have commanded you” includes the command to make disciples. So that means disciple-making is a command for all disciples, right?

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Peter also tells Christians to “always” be “prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you” (1 Pet 3:15). Paul tells the Colossians to use opportunities to speak to outsiders about “grace”, which must have something to do with the gospel (Col 4:5-6, NIV; cf. Col 1:6).

But if you think about it further, these commands by themselves are a pretty flimsy basis for proving that God wants every individual Christian to evangelize. It’s possible, isn’t it, that “make disciples” is just a general command for the church as a whole. Clearly, the *church* is expected to evangelize. But that doesn’t mean that I, personally, have to do it. Furthermore, the verses from Peter and Paul don’t really prove much. Being ready to give an answer and to make the most of opportunities seems to assume that evangelism is a passive and sporadic activity at best. When was the last time anybody asked you to give an answer for the hope that was in you? Anyway, the ‘evangelist’ was a special role in the early church (Acts 21:8; Eph 4:11; 2 Tim 4:5). So some people suggest that these commands don’t amount to very much.

But take a step back for a moment. Why are you looking for a command in the first place?

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Normally we look for commands when we need a reason to do something unpleasant. When I tell my kids to eat their vegetables, they want me to give them a command with exact specifications. They ask: Do I have to eat all of the vegetables? If not, how many? Does that include the ones mashed into the potatoes? But it's a different story with chocolate. If I put chocolate in front of them, no command is required. That's because, for them, there's no reason not to eat chocolate. The same thing applies when we start asking whether we're commanded to evangelize. By asking the question we're treating evangelism like kids treat eating vegetables. We're saying that evangelism is technically a good thing to do, but we'd prefer not to do it unless we really have to. That should tell us that something has gone wrong somewhere.

In recent times, certain evangelists and writers have approached the issue in a better way. They've realized that it's not enough simply to scour the Bible for individual commands. Instead, they've asked a broader question: what patterns of mission did the Bible writers (e.g. Paul) expect to be happening in their churches? And how can we follow the same

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patterns?³ This can be a more helpful approach, because it helps us to think in terms of bigger principles.

But in this book, I'm not going to follow that approach—because ultimately, it's not enough. There's something more fundamental; a truth that needs to grip us before we even start to think about commands or communities or church organization or pragmatics or patterns or gifts. We need to understand the relationship between human speech and the gospel itself. According to the Bible, there is something deeply and profoundly important about human speech, especially when we come to think

3 For a couple of practical books from my part of the world with different perspectives on the issue of individual evangelism, see *Know and Tell the Gospel* by John Chapman and *The Best Kept Secret of Christian Mission: Promoting the Gospel with More Than Our Lips* by John Dickson. For some more academic books about Paul's expectations for his churches, again with different perspectives, see *Mission-Commitment in Ancient Judaism and in the Pauline Communities: The shape, extent and background of early Christian mission* by John Dickson, *Paul and the Mission of the Church: Philippians in Ancient Jewish Context* by James P Ware, and *Paul's Understanding of the Church's Mission: Did the Apostle Paul Expect the Early Christian Communities to Evangelize?* by Robert L Plummer. This last book has been helpfully summarized by Kevin deYoung in his article 'Paul's understanding of the church's mission', *The Gospel Coalition*, 13 May 2011 (viewed 14 August 2015): <http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevindeyoung/2011/05/13/pauls-understand-of-the-churchs-mission/>.

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about the gospel. In fact, the Bible often talks about human speech and salvation in the same breath.

You might have realized already that I don't like the title of my own chapter, 'Are all Christians commanded to evangelize?' I don't like the word 'commanded'. But actually, I don't like the word 'evangelize' either. It's too rubbery, and means different things to different people. What popped into your head when you read the word 'evangelize'? If I asked this question of ten different people, I'd probably get eleven different answers. From now on, I'm going to erase the word 'evangelism' from this book. Instead, I'm going to use the more useful, albeit more clunky, phrase 'gospel speech'. That will help us to get to the heart of the issue: What does the Bible say about how human beings use words to speak the gospel—to whomever, however, whenever?

Of course, that means we need to talk more about the gospel itself. And we will. In the rest of this book, we'll look at what the gospel has to say about various questions or objections to gospel speech:

- I'm not good enough.
- I'm not gifted enough.
- I'm not really a 'speaking' Christian.

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- I can promote the gospel better by my good works.
- I'm not the mouth in Christ's body.
- I'm more comfortable speaking the gospel to insiders rather than outsiders.
- I can't do what they're doing.