

J. MACK STILES

Foreword by MARK DEVER

MARKS *of the*
MESSENGER

Knowing, Living and Speaking the Gospel

"I do not think I have ever read a book on evangelism that makes me more eager to pass it on than this one—better, that makes me more eager to evangelize than this one. Like its author, the book is irrepressible. Better yet, it is faithful to Scripture while overflowing with that least common gift, common sense. Read it, practice it, then buy some more and pass them out."

D. A. Carson, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School

"A fresh and refreshing encouragement from a gifted evangelist. Mack Stiles has lived out what he teaches, both in North America and in the Middle East. His material has been field-tested in two completely different parts of the world! So the principles you find in this book will be transcultural and applicable to believers seeking to bear witness to Christ wherever they are located in the world."

Lindsay Brown, Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization

"Most of what we read about evangelism puts heavy emphasis on evangelistic methods—'how to' evangelism. When's the last time you read a book that focused attention on the evangelists themselves—their hearts, their minds, their lives and, most of all, their message? This is such a book, and it's explosive. *Marks of the Messenger* challenges and encourages us, and makes us laugh and weep along the way. Mack Stiles is the most gifted evangelist I know. And this book is saturated with biblical truth and personal wisdom."

Thabiti Anyabwile, First Baptist Church of Grand Cayman

"Perhaps no part of the Christian life and ministry is easier to neglect, postpone or just plain ignore than evangelism. And this is why I love reading books on evangelism by true practitioners, who love the lost and consistently live out this burden. Mack Stiles is one of those guys! Mack loves people who need the gospel. If you, like me, want to grow in evangelism, I highly recommend Mack's book."

C. J. Mahaney, Sovereign Grace Ministries

MARKS *of the*
MESSENGER

Knowing, Living and Speaking the Gospel



J. MACK STILES

Foreword by MARK DEVER


IVP Books

An imprint of InterVarsity Press
Downers Grove, Illinois

InterVarsity Press

P.O. Box 1400, Downers Grove, IL 60515-1426

World Wide Web: www.ivpress.com

E-mail: email@ivpress.com

©2010 by J. Mack Stiles

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form without written permission from InterVarsity Press.

InterVarsity Press® is the book-publishing division of InterVarsity Christian Fellowship/USA®, a movement of students and faculty active on campus at hundreds of universities, colleges and schools of nursing in the United States of America, and a member movement of the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students. For information about local and regional activities, write Public Relations Dept., InterVarsity Christian Fellowship/USA, 6400 Schroeder Rd., P.O. Box 7895, Madison, WI 53707-7895, or visit the IVCF website at <www.intervarsity.org>.

All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version®. NIV®. Copyright ©1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Publishing House. All rights reserved.

Design: Cindy Kiple

Images: © Francesco Cura/Dreamstime.com

© Tyler Olson/Dreamstime.com

ISBN 978-0-8308-67158 (digital)

ISBN 978-0-8308-3350-4 (print)

To

David and Kris Lawrence

Brian and Joanne Parks

Colaborers and lifelong friends

CONTENTS

| | |
|--|-----|
| Foreword by Mark Dever | 9 |
| Acknowledgments. | 13 |
| 1. ROGER'S QUESTION | |
| <i>Don't Peddle the Gospel</i> | 15 |
| 2. STUDENTS OF THE MESSAGE | |
| <i>Don't Add or Subtract from the Gospel</i> | 25 |
| 3. ON YOUR GUARD | |
| <i>Don't Assume the Gospel</i> | 37 |
| 4. DOES THE MESSAGE WE SHARE LOOK LIKE THE MESSAGE WE BEAR? | |
| <i>Living the Implications of the Gospel</i> | 49 |
| 5. MESSENGERS IN A TROUBLED WORLD | |
| <i>The Gospel and Social Change</i> | 61 |
| 6. WAVING THE FLAG | |
| <i>Understanding True Biblical Conversion</i> | 71 |
| 7. BE BOLD | |
| <i>Slaying the Fear Factor When Sharing Our Faith</i> | 81 |
| 8. WORLDLY LOVE AND ITS FRUITS | |
| <i>Mistaking the World's Love for God's Love</i> | 91 |
| 9. THE GOSPEL MADE VISIBLE | |
| <i>The Church</i> | 101 |
| 10. A MANIFESTO FOR HEALTHY EVANGELISM | |
| <i>Taking Action</i> | 111 |
| Notes | 124 |

FOREWORD

Books on evangelism are either discouraging or encouraging.

Think about it.

Few topics are more discouraging when talked about vaguely and guilt-inducingly than evangelism. "How many people have you led to Christ? This week?" "Why didn't you share the gospel with that new guy at work?" "You can only share the gospel correctly if you do it like this." "If you really believed this . . ." Never mind. You get the idea.

And yet, few topics are more encouraging when talked about with biblical wisdom, practical insight and genuine excitement. Stories of evangelism done faithfully, accounts of people's conversions—these are conversations that kindle my affections for Christ and stoke my enthusiasm to share the good news about him with others.

But, I have to say honestly, most books on evangelism are more

of the discouraging variety. This book is different.

Not only is this book one of those rare encouraging books on evangelism, but it is one of those even more rare *instructive* books on evangelism. Think Packer or Metzger, only with more transparent passion and punch.

This book is like its author. I've known Mack for over twenty years. And reading this book is a lot like listening to him talk—an enjoyable experience, where excitement and wisdom mingle freely. Lots of Bible. Lots of stories. Stories, it has to be said, that are right next door to incredible.

If you wonder if these stories could really be true, let me just add my witness to at least some of them—Mack has a memory like an elephant and lives life in vivid colors. For decades now, I've seen Mack do exactly the kind of stuff that he talks about on these pages.

Mack is one of those people—like Spurgeon or Hudson Taylor—to whom amazing things happen. Why do all of these things happen to him? That's a question that only God can certainly answer. Is it because he is so careful to note, to remember, to recount, and so to encourage Christians and bring God more glory? Mack remembers so many stories. He remembers stories about my life better than I do! And he uses the great acts of God in his own experience to illustrate biblical truths—truths that are important for us to be reminded of.

In this book, we are given biblical clarity on the gospel, with extraordinary experience in evangelism. The result is an instructive exposé, a warning about where too many of us are today, about how we've become fuzzy around the edges—and some-

Foreword

times even near the core—of the gospel. In this book, Mack puts the evangel back in evangelism. If we read it praying for God's Spirit to help us apply its truths to our own evangelism, we may do the same.

*Mark Dever, Senior Pastor, Capitol Hill Baptist Church, Washington, D.C.
Director, 9Marks.org*

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I owe a special thanks to my family: Leeann, Tristan, David and Isaac—fountains of great joy. Thanks to those who believed in this project from the start: Issa, Nigel, Ray, Jyothi, Onsy and Biju. Many thanks to Ted Callahan and his late wife, Judi, and to Tom Dupree and his late wife, Clara. Thanks also to B. Ray, Juann and daughter Adella. Special thanks to United Christian Church of Dubai, especially the Friday Foundations Class, and John and Keri Folmar. Also, thanks to the great folk at Capitol Hill Baptist Church, to whom I own such great debts: the entire concept of healthy marks, for one. I'm grateful especially to Mark and Connie Dever, and Michael and Adrienne Lawrence. Ross and Kathy Durham have been a help over the years in pointing me to the centrality of the gospel. I'm grateful for Jim and Beth Reed and their friendship, love and support. I'm grateful for the entire MENA team, especially Jamil, Hussam, Sha-

her, Zaher and Ellie, who graciously put up with an American in their midst. And the entire FOCUS team who cheerfully picked up the slack when I was hidden away writing, especially Joanna, Nisin, Adrian and Sara. Words can't express my gratitude to Lindsay Brown and his endless vision for the kingdom. Thanks also to the Swiss ski team friends, especially Piers. And the folks at Quest, especially Pete and Jackie, John and Helen, and Billy. And, of course, thanks to faithful and longtime editor, Andy Le Peau. Many others to whom gratitude is due are quoted in this book.

Dubai

August 2009

ROGER'S QUESTION

Don't Peddle the Gospel



Years ago my boss, Roger, asked me, "Mack, who do you want to be?"

He could tell I bristled at the administration required by my overly administrative job. I think he actually meant "don't complain." But I took him more seriously than he intended. So a couple of months later, after mulling that question over in my head, I decided to quit that job, pack up the family and move to the Middle East.

Roger thought I'd lost my mind.

We spent a year in transition and preparation and then, just as we readied to depart, 9/11 happened.

Still, I banged the "For Sale" sign in the front yard of my house the next day, so convinced was I that this was the very opportunity for me to be who I was meant to be. To join in the call of Christ that

was wild and free and wonderful. To live the gospel with love and boldness. To show the world that the church's response to the horrific events of 9/11 were not military, but missionary.

At least that's how it felt on 9/12.

The gut check happened when the house sold on 9/13. Second thoughts swirled through my mind. Were we really moving to the place those suicide bombers lived? Thankfully my wife, more unwavering than her husband, kept us focused and on track so that we, with our three sons, moved to Dubai a few short months later.

And it's been wonderful.

We discovered, once we got here, that the Middle East is made of hospitable and wonderful people, the vast majority of whom are as far away from suicide bombers as most people in America are from chainsaw murderers. It turns out, living the Christian faith in the Muslim world is in some ways easier than living out faith in a secular society. I have far more genuine opportunities to share the gospel than I did in the United States.

Yet still, I'm amazed at how true those naive and noble thoughts were in the front yard of my house in Kentucky. It truly has been a time to pursue who I was meant to be, to be shaped by the truth of the gospel of Christ.

WHO DOES JESUS WANT US TO BE?

So, I've often thought of Roger and his question. "Who do you want to be?" I've wondered why we don't ask Roger's question more. I've wondered why we usually ask the question "What do you want to do?" I'm not exactly sure why that is. Maybe it's because we're so busy "doing" that we don't think first. Maybe it's because we're

raised on the idea that we can make ourselves whatever we want to be. Maybe it's because we find our identity in our accomplishments or our jobs. Maybe it's the outcome we fear—after all you could say, "Look at Mack. He started thinking through who he was meant to be and he ended up moving to the Middle East."

Well, for whatever reason, I'm convinced we don't ask Roger's question enough. And if we don't ask the question, we get into all kinds of problems in life's situations. This isn't new news; after all, didn't your mother tell you to "think before you act"?

It's especially critical to know who we are meant to be spiritually. To leave Roger's question unasked in our Christian life gets us into a whole host of spiritual problems.

"Christian . . . who do you want to be?"

Most Christians, me included, would respond, "I want to be more like Jesus."

But wait. It's too easy to jump from wanting to be more like Jesus to "What Would Jesus Do." Before we jump, we should make sure we understand who Jesus would have us *be*.

Acting without a biblical understanding of who Jesus wants us to *be* is the reason so many become unhealthy in their spiritual lives, producing unhealthy disciples and unhealthy churches.

In the same way, to act without a biblical understanding of who Jesus wants us to be in evangelism produces unhealthy evangelists.

I find that most Christians want to be able to share their faith. But without coming to grips with some basic principles about who we are to be as evangelists, we can produce some unhealthy evangelism. So become a healthy evangelist by first asking, "Who do we want to be as people who share their faith?" And we must ask, "Who

would Jesus have us be—period?” This is a bedrock question.

And the answer, in a nutshell: Jesus asks his followers to *be* people of faith. That is, we put our complete faith and trust in him in two important ways.

We are people of faith by first believing in Christ. His story comes to us through the message of the gospel. We’ll speak more about the message of the gospel in the next chapter, but it’s enough to say now that there’s some confusion about the gospel, and we need to make sure we’ve got it right so that we can be who we are meant to be.

Second, we are people of faith by becoming faithful followers. We place our trust in the teachings of Jesus from the Bible.¹

Then, springing out of faith in Christ’s work and commitment to his teaching, we endeavor to live faithful lives. We define faithful living according to what Jesus and his apostles define as faithful living in the Bible. It’s a striking thing that we cannot please God without faith (Hebrews 11:6). That means two people can be doing the exact same thing, but one is kingdom work and the other is from the pits of hell. They may look the same, but to God in the spiritual realms, the equation doesn’t work without faith.

Notice this commitment to faithful living, to action, to doing—including evangelism—only comes after we have answered the question of who we are to be, that is, people of faith in Christ. To share faith means that we must have faith first.

Sadly, there are many who are busy with religious work who never nail that down. The world is filled with people who are not people of faith first—including Sunday school teachers, pastors and missionaries.

One of them was my wife. She actively shared her faith in her youth group. Then it dawned on her, while sharing about faith with another high school student, that she wasn't a person of faith herself. She had not been clear that being a Christian was not a matter of being active in church or Christian culture, but rather was a matter of putting her complete faith and trust in Christ. Fortunately, she took the time to reorder her life, think through who Jesus wanted her to be and place her faith in him. But many never do.

So why have people jumped to action, in this case evangelistic action, before being people of faith? Maybe it's because they can. We have not been watchful enough about the conditions of people's hearts before we ask them to act, because with the right method or program, the condition of a person's heart isn't that important. We have become pragmatists.

THE PROBLEM WITH PRAGMATISM

There are numerous obstacles to becoming healthy evangelists. But I'm convinced that the greatest obstacle to healthy evangelism is pragmatism: "doing evangelism" before we ever think who we are meant to be as evangelists. The result is an evangelism that is twisted and deformed.²

Success drives pragmatic evangelism. Pragmatic evangelism never asks the question "Who are we to be as an evangelist?" Pragmatic evangelism only asks the question "What works?"

Pragmatic evangelism is "doing" evangelism in a way that elevates success and method over anything else. It becomes the business of evangelism. This may look cool or uncool, it may look relevant or

irrelevant, but regardless, when evangelism is untethered to who we are meant to be as people of faith, evangelistic practice eventually becomes twisted and deformed. It becomes programmatic rather than personal; it becomes success at any cost, even if the cost is manipulation or even unethical practice. And sadly, because success sells, it's often unquestioned in the Christian community.

Pragmatic evangelism is about promotion. It's rarely concerned about the integrity of the message, since it's more about style and method than substance and authenticity. Jesus regularly told his disciples not to talk about him. Part of the reason so many are baffled by this command is our pragmatic commitment to promotional evangelism. Jesus understood that in the disciples' desire to promote, they would promote the wrong things in the wrong way.

After Peter has made the stunning confession that Jesus was the son of the living God (Matthew 16:16), Jesus strictly warns them not to speak of him. Why? Though they knew a bit about who Jesus was, they didn't have the message right. So when Jesus begins to teach about his coming torture and crucifixion, Peter rebukes Jesus for such an awful idea, proving he didn't understand the message—and this only a moment after Peter has spoken rightly about Christ's true identity. Jesus rebukes Peter and says that his thoughts are the thoughts of men and of Satan, not of God. Peter may have been the first pragmatic evangelist, but not the last.

Do you see the similarity with us? We can speak beautifully about the glorious revelation of Jesus being the Christ, and in almost the same breath speak "Satanic verses" that deny the cross.

Pragmatic evangelism offers methods. Shelves of Christian

bookstores are filled with books on evangelistic methods—both personal methods and methods for church growth. When those methods are no longer successful, rebels ridicule yesteryear's method and offer more palatable and effective methods in their place, which is really not that different than marketing the same product in a new and better wrapper.

Pragmatic evangelism counts: converts, members, programs, but rarely counts faithfulness to the message or the faithfulness of the messenger.

As a result most people, when they consider evangelism, think of questions that lead people to some spiritual conclusion, or service programs that gain applause from the community, or a way to tailor church services to be more appealing. I'm not opposed to soup kitchens or jazz in the church foyer as long as we don't think these things are the same thing as evangelism. But they will become unhealthy evangelism if they build on an unhealthy platform, that is, if we've not asked and answered Roger's question.

Besides, when we take this product off the shelf, drawn to it at first by the bedazzling glitter and promise of results, and look at it closely, we don't like what we see. There's just this sense that the core message of the Christian faith sure takes a lot of human effort to get across or, worse, that the core message is lost altogether. Do we really need to entertain people to get them to listen to the gospel? It's been an effective method for drawing in numbers of people, but has it really produced a robust evangelism or robust faith? Play jazz if you want, but play to glorify God in and of itself, not to do evangelism.

Recently I was leading a seminar on evangelism. Since I believe

that evangelism is a matter of knowing the gospel and living the gospel, both of which include, when appropriate, speaking the gospel, that's what we talked about. At the end of the seminar a man came up to me and said, "Mack, I'm so grateful for our time. I confess I almost didn't come—usually these seminars make me feel like I'm in training to become an insurance salesman."

Now, I don't have anything against insurance salesmen—or any salesmen for that matter, but I knew what he meant. Somehow there's this feeling that as evangelists we must learn how to

- pitch the message with a careful appeal to self-interest
- promote a program with pizzazz
- overcome hesitations with a winsome manner
- avoid any offense or problems
- answer objections with humor
- instill fears of losing out
- manipulate conversation to a point of decision
- sign on the dotted line with a sinner's prayer and
- hone our skills to close the deal

Which is fine for insurance, I guess, but Jesus?

For one, Jesus is far too precious to be trivialized that way—and I know Christian insurance agents who agree. So why is it that we keep trying to package the gospel and market it?

Well, because it works, at least if you believe statistics. George Barna reports that 45 percent of Americans in 2006 claim to be born again. That's 130 million people! Yet something seems terri-

bly wrong, since Barna also notes that only 9 percent seem to take what Jesus says seriously in their lives. Many claim Jesus as Lord, but if they don't do what he says, it indicates—according to Jesus—that they aren't his followers in the first place (Luke 6:46).

Could it be that people have prayed a prayer of commitment to the wrong God or agreed to follow something other than Jesus? Maybe they've been led to think that they can take Jesus and mix it with their own way of thinking?

Could it be that people have been persuaded to purchase a bill of goods that doesn't tell the whole story about Jesus in the first place? Maybe much the same as when people purchase, say, an insurance policy without really knowing what it says?

You bet. It happens all the time, with insurance and with Jesus.

So because people are so concerned about results and numbers, their converts often pray to a different God, follow another Jesus, mix Jesus with human thinking without knowing the whole story.

But is that who we want to be as bearers of the good news? Do we want to peddle the gospel (2 Corinthians 2:17)?

No, as evangelists we want to be people who are more concerned with our faithfulness in presenting Christ clearly than we are with results. We want to be the kind of evangelists who take people more seriously than to manipulate them into a prayer of commitment. And we want to be people who present the gospel with care, knowing spiritual lives are at stake.

Okay, so becoming a healthy evangelist is not about what we do, but who we are. We see how pragmatic evangelism can be dangerous to genuine faith. But if it's not pragmatic evangelism what is it? How do we become healthy evangelists?

The first step is to make sure we understand the gospel of Jesus, something a bit more controversial than you might think—the subject of the next chapter.