

# Speaking to Teenagers

HOW TO THINK ABOUT, CREATE,  
& DELIVER EFFECTIVE MESSAGES



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

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“This book is so packed with practical ideas, riveting illustrations, hard-fought wisdom, and jokes about thinning hair that you’d be crazy to pass it up. Duffy and Doug are the Dream Team of youth ministry communicators, but they have the hearts of two guys who know what it’s like to blow it. It’s their mix of vigorous thinking about communicating and their rich history of actually doing it well that make this book unique. There’s a genuine treasure here—read it, practice it, and you’ll make a much bigger impact in your ministry.”

—**Rick Lawrence, executive editor, GROUP Magazine**

“A rapidly changing youth culture requires us to be increasingly deliberate in the preparation and delivery of our messages to the teenage audience. Whether I’m in the audience or sitting across the table, I have learned to listen whenever my friends Doug and Duffy open their mouths. As always, their words in *Speaking to Teenagers* need to be heard. Listen hard. The principles they communicate in this book will enable you to gain respect and be heard when you speak to kids, so they’ll hear the life-changing message you’ve been called to communicate.”

—**Walt Mueller, president, Center for Parent/Youth Understanding; author, *Youth Culture 101* and *Engaging the Soul of Youth Culture***

“Not a week goes by that I’m not asked by an aspiring young communicator how to become a better speaker to students. Now I can just hand them this incredible book—by two men who know what they’re talking about. and have influenced so many—and tell them to leave me alone!”

—**Stuart Hall, Dash Inc; coauthor, *Seven Checkpoints for Students* and *Max Q: Developing Students of Influence***

“I presented biblical messages to students for 20 years and taught others to do the same. How I wish we’d all had the wisdom and direction in this book. The vault of experience and insight from decades of communication is opened here. The treasure is there for the taking.”

—**Dan Webster, founder, Authentic Leadership, Inc.**

“Doug and Duffy, two legends of youth ministry, have combined to write what just may be my favorite youth ministry book ever! If you teach once a week, once a year, or simply hope to teach once some day, this book is a must read.”

—**Kurt Johnston, junior high pastor, Saddleback Church; founder, [www.simplyjuniorhigh.com](http://www.simplyjuniorhigh.com)**

“Youth ministry and classic don’t often go together, but in the world of youth work, every few years a book stands out as mandatory reading and should be termed a classic. Doug Fields and Duffy Robbins have written just such a book with the very practical, real, and accessible *Speaking to Teenagers*...”

—**Chap Clark, Ph.D., senior editor, *Youthworker Journal*; professor of youth, family, and culture, Fuller Seminary**

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“Doug Fields and Duffy Robbins are two men who I greatly respect and admire, and they have put together an incredibly practical work that will help anyone who ministers to teenagers. Whether you’re a veteran speaker or a new youth worker putting together your first ‘talk,’ this book is an absolute must read!”

—**Greg Stier, President Dare 2 Share Ministries**

“Simply put, this book is fantastic. The junior highers (and others) who I get a chance to speak to will unquestionably benefit from what I’ve learned and been reminded of in these pages!”

—**Scott Rubin, junior high pastor, Willow Creek Community Church**

“Finally—a book that is both deep enough to transform the way we talk with students and practical enough to use every week.”

—**Kara E. Powell, executive director, Center for Youth and Family Ministry, Fuller Theological Seminary**

“Two veteran communicators have combined to give youth speakers a whole bunch of great guidance for thinking through, preparing, and delivering messages that can effectively speak truth into the lives of teenagers. This one belongs in your library!”

—**Dr. R. Allen Jackson, professor of youth education, New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary**

“Whenever Doug or Duffy is speaking, I try to listen. They understand the unique dynamics of teaching teenagers like no one else. They are authentic, honest, and a gift to youth workers everywhere. Speaking to Teenagers is more than a book; it’s a marvelous contribution to youth ministry that will bless anyone who has ever tried to teach teenagers.”

—**Jeanne Stevens, director of training, Youth Specialties**

“This is the best book on Speaking to Teenagers in the world by my two favorite youth speakers. There’s no doubt in my mind that after you read and apply the principles in this book, you will be a more effective communicator to students. Don’t miss this rare opportunity to learn from the best of the best.”

—**Jim Burns, president, HomeWord; author, *Confident Parenting* and *Creating an Intimate Marriage***

“This book, written by two of this generation’s most effective communicators, is a 911 call for those of us (full time, part time, or lay leader) serious about the urgent task to use the 30 minutes we have to raise the dead. No more flavors of the month, latest fads, or quick fixes. This is a must-read for those of us who desire crystal-clear communication.”

—**Dr. Jay Strack, founder and president, Studentleadership.net**

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“I’ve been waiting for *Speaking to Teenagers* for some time for a number of reasons. As a professor who teaches a course on communication, I’ve needed a text that’s compelling, academic, and practical. As a ‘professional’ speaker, I need my skills to be honed and sharpened. As a consultant, I need a first-class resource for speakers of all kinds. Doug and Duffy have put together a humorous, engaging, and profound book guaranteed to be a best-seller in youth ministry venues. They know teenagers and how to speak to them. Doug Fields and Duffy Robbins are excellent communicators, two of the best I have ever known. They have earned the right to write *Speaking to Teenagers*, you are going to love this book!”

—**Dr. David Olshine, director of youth ministries, Columbia International University; cofounder, Youth Ministry Coaches**

“Buy this book, read this book, do what it says. It will improve your ‘reach’ to youth! We need more people who can connect with teenagers with the love and intensity that Doug and Duffy have. I am excited for aspiring speakers to read *Speaking to Teenagers*. The book is both a great self-help manual and a humorous autobiography of two outstanding speakers who’re great at connecting with adolescents. Each of their personalities and styles comes across as though the reader is sitting down, listening to their collaborative discussion. Their guidelines are solid, and their differences of interpretation will speak to a wide range of aspiring, effective communicators. Whether you’re speaking to a handful of teenagers or an arena full of them, this book will lead to self-evaluation and improvement.”

—**Rev. Terry B. Carty, executive director, United Methodist YouthWorker Movement, Nashville, Tennessee**

“A central part of every youth ministry is based on effective communication, yet this continues to be one of our most underdeveloped skills! We (okay, I) think we’re better communicators than we are. I learned from this book and was reminded of several essential communication principles I rarely put into practice. A big thanks to Doug and Duffy for a nice volume that makes a difference immediately.”

—**Mark Matlock, author, *What Does God Want from Me***

“*Speaking to Teenagers* is the most practical, comprehensive, and entertaining resource ever written and available for youth workers, teachers, and other caring adults who desire to speak in a way that invites and compels students to listen. Doug and Duffy have given us a great gift. I will recommend it to every novice and veteran youth worker I know.”

—**Rich Van Pelt, author, speaker, National Director of Ministry Relationships, Compassion International**

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“I wonder how many of us over the years have called Doug or Duffy and asked for the chance to ‘pick their brains.’ Speaking to Teenagers gives all of us that chance at the same time. Profoundly practical, filled with the kind of laugh-out-loud hilarity that years of friendship bring, this book takes the mystery out of preparing talks that hit their mark. I’ll take advice from these two any day.”

—**Mark DeVries, Youth Ministry Architects, [www.ymarchitects.com](http://www.ymarchitects.com)**

“God knew the clearest way he could reveal himself to mankind was in the incarnation. God knew we needed to see him with flesh on. The same principle applies today. Most of us grasp Truth best when we see it in the flesh. Even for media-immersed youth, an effective speaker far transcends ones and zeros and virtual identities. That godly, Spirit-empowered speaker doesn’t encompass all of God’s story in a young life, but he or she is certainly part of that story. Doug and Duffy have written the definitive book on this subject, and it now will show up in every classroom where I teach the next generation of youth leaders.”

—**Richard Ross, Ph.D., professor of student ministry, Southwestern Seminary**

“This book delivers! Doug and Duffy are masters of the craft of handling the serious and practical challenges of communication to teenagers. Homiletics courses everywhere should require this book!”

—**Dave Rahn, PhD, vice president & chief ministry officer, YFC/USA  
Director, Huntington University’s MA in Youth Ministry Leadership**

“Doug and Duffy have done years of hard work developing their teaching gifts, and now they’ve provided us with a resource that shares their years of experience and key points of learning. This resource is a true gift to those of us who’ve been called to speak to this generation. I’m confident this book will help you become a more effective communicator. The stakes are too high for you to not steward the teaching gifts that God has given you.”

—**Bo Boshers, executive director, student ministries, Willow Creek Association**

“Robbins and Fields are two of the most respected youth workers in America. Their combined years of experience speaking to youth, together with excellent research and insightful tips, make this book a valuable resource for those who want their messages to be more effective. Speaking to Teenagers will be required reading for my youth ministry students.”

—**Dan Lambert, professor of youth ministries, John Brown University**

“Doug and Duffy have given us solid help for something we all do as youth workers. I love the combination of ‘big picture’ perspectives coupled with practical help. Of course their humility and humor make the book a constant delight. This is a must-read for anyone who speaks to teenagers on a regular basis.”

—**Len Kageler, Ph.D., chair, youth ministry department, Nyack (NY) College**

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**Doug FIELDS + Duffy ROBBINS**

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*Speaking to Teenagers: How to Think About, Create, and Deliver Effective Messages*

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Web site addresses listed in this book were current at the time of publication. Please contact Youth Specialties via e-mail ([YS@YouthSpecialties.com](mailto:YS@YouthSpecialties.com)) to report URLs that are no longer operational and replacement URLs if available.

*Interior design by Mark Novelli, IMAGO MEDIA*



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## Written in Memory of Mike Yaconelli

Our friend, mentor, and a great communicator who taught us both so much.

### Dedicated to Tic Long

In your 30-plus years of creative, thoughtful, and passionate service at Youth Specialties, you've proven yourself a friend to anybody who cares about youth ministry. And for those of us who've known your friendship first-hand, the privilege has been greater still. We love you and respect you. We wouldn't share the type of ministry joys that we've experienced if it weren't for you. You are a gift!

### Thanks

*From Doug:* I wouldn't have anything to write on speaking if it weren't for the three men who've taught me and modeled for me everything I know about speaking since my teenage years to present. I'm blessed to have had Jim Burns, Tim Timmons, and Rick Warren as my mentors and teachers—I'm almost embarrassed to admit that you have been so influential in my life ("Well, no wonder you know what you're talking about—look who you learned from!"). I consider myself most blessed to have been coworkers with you.

There are always close friends around me who don't necessarily write, edit, or contribute to book projects in specific ways, but they're always contributing to my life, and nothing I write is void of their daily influence or inspiration; Matt McGill, Jana Sarti, Josh Griffin, and Andy Brazelton—I'm so blessed to have your friendship.

I'm also very grateful to some friends who read the manuscript and aided and improved it with ideas and questions—thank you Jeff Maguire, Neely McQueen, Jason Petty, and Allison McCroskey.

Thank you Cathy, Torie, Cody, and Cassie Fields for being so wonderful and fun and encouraging—you have all spoken into my life and given me something to say. Thank you for unselfishly sacrificing your husband/dad and for allowing our lives to be an illustration to others.

Finally, I'm so thankful for all the teenagers at South Coast Community and Saddleback Church who've allowed me the privilege to speak to you about Jesus...what an honor it has been!

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*From Duffy:* One of the great things about speaking on the road is that I get to come home to some dear friends, colleagues, and students at Eastern University! One of those people is our chaplain, and a true pastor, Joe Modica, and our Provost, Chris Hall. You two guys continue to walk with me as brothers, and you never cease to inspire me with your scholarship, your friendship, and your authentic faith. One minute you make me think really deeply, and the next you make me laugh really hard. What a gift! And, of course, there are my trusty coworkers in the Youth Ministry major: Darrell Pearson, Calenthia Dowdy, and Eduardo Ramirez. I love watching you guys use your gifts, and I'm honored to serve alongside you. Thanks for letting me be on your team!

Thanks to Dan Hallock, Larry Renoe, and Casey Prince for reading through this manuscript and giving us your thoughtful feedback.

Thank you, Maggie Robbins, for your continued pursuit of Jesus and your faithful love for your husband. How many miles have we traveled together? (And the adventure continues!) Even when you're not traveling with me, I know you're with me.

And thanks to my girls: Erin and Katie, for loving your dad so well. What a ride we've had! And, now, there's Peter (son-in-law) and Henry and Sadie and....! I didn't think this family could get any better, and then you guys come along! I'm a grateful man.

Henry and Sadie, my personal prayer for this book is that it might in some way wind up in the hands of a youth pastor who will one day be standing up, speaking to you guys in your youth group, and that there will be something in these pages that will help him or her draw you closer to the Savior. What a cool thing that would be!

And finally, I have to thank all the speakers, pastors, and youth pastors from whom I have stolen illustrations over the years. There are way too many of you to mention. That's why I never say your name when I use your stuff. But, thanks! Without you, I truly never would be able to speak to teenagers!

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## Cheering You On

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**Just by holding this book in your hands,** you've gained our immediate respect. Regardless of whether you teach weekly, biweekly, monthly, or fill in whenever someone is sick—we understand and respect anyone who tries to teach teenagers God's ways. The task is mighty, the responsibility is high, and the weight that you feel as a communicator is heavy.

Few people are born with the passion, desire, and skills to teach teenagers. Some are, but most of us stumble into this with no training, a little bit of encouragement, and below-average modeling.

Most youth workers learn to speak as they go, and many of them wind up copying the people they've listened to (which can be good or bad). So whether you're a rookie speaker or a professional, we applaud you for wanting to speak to teenagers. And regardless of your youth-working status—volunteer or full-time paid—we want to help you become a more effective speaker.

To do this, we've divided the book into three sections:

1. Thinking about your messages
2. Creating your messages
3. Delivering your messages

This will be a fun journey as you walk through these pages, learn, experiment, evaluate, and set your sights on becoming a more effective communicator. It's a privilege and an honor for us to play the role of guide as you journey and learn.

While both of us speak to teenagers almost weekly, I'm [Duffy] usually speaking to different groups of teenagers at events around the country, and Doug is in the local church teaching the same teenagers each week.

I'd describe Doug as a good-looking, somewhat-fit guy with thinning hair. (Sorry about *somewhat*, Doug.) His look is "Youth Ministry Meets Orange County." Teenagers look at Doug and think, *Hey, this is gonna be good!*

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I, on the other hand, look more like somebody's weird Uncle Frank. No facial hair, only a few remaining square inches of scalp hair. *Fit* is not the first word that comes to mind when teenagers see me. My look is more like "Youth Ministry meets McDonalds." When I get in front of teenagers, they usually think, *Is that what I'm going to look like when I grow up?*

We're sharing these author descriptions with you (our photos are on the back cover of this book) because we want to make sure you understand something about this book and the people who wrote it. This book is *not* about two guys who believe they're hotshots who've mastered public speaking. We're just two youth workers who've learned a lot about speaking in the trenches of real-life youth ministry for 25-plus years (Doug—that's why he's a little more fit) and 30-plus years (Duffy—a.k.a., weird Uncle Frank).

We know what it's like to be in the heat of battle, to stand there on the firing line unsure if you're the shooter or the target. We've been there when the talk was a direct hit; we've been there when it bombed (and prayed the bomb would take us away from speaking engagements forever). We know what it's like to be in awe of God's power and the fact that God uses us in teenagers' lives, and we know what it's like to crawl away feeling something between shell shock and post-traumatic stress. Just because we've written this book doesn't mean we have all the answers. But we're hopeful that some of the lessons we've learned will help you become a better communicator.

*One quick note about two authors writing one book together:* Since we really wrote this book *together*, it's virtually impossible to be clear about where Duffy's words end and Doug's words start. This was not a "you-write-half-of-the-chapters-and-I'll-write-the-other-half" approach. We birthed this baby together! It was quite the delivery—lots of laughs, some deep discussions, a few disagreements, a lot of prayer for the general project, and a lot of prayer specifically for you—the reader/youth worker.

Because this was a writing partnership, sometimes, if you read very carefully, you'll notice that certain sentences seem to be professorial, deep, and thought provoking, while others seem to be more, well...purpose-driven. But for the sake of smooth reading, we've chosen to write as though you're hearing one voice—and not load the book down with obnoxious parentheses or brackets that identify the author for each sentence (like we did a few paragraphs ago). So when you read the word I, you won't know if it's Doug or Duffy writing, unless we think it's a big deal for you to know—and then we'll tell you. But most of the time, we won't.

This one-voice style of writing also helps us protect our reputations because if a certain portion of the book comes under heavy fire as being particularly ridiculous or quoting an invalid source, we can both claim, "Oh, that was written by the *other* guy." Although, most readers familiar with the youth ministry world will certainly know that any theological mistakes came from

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Duffy. (See? We don't need to identify who wrote that sentence, we assume you can figure it out.)

Thanks for picking up this book, thanks for committing to grow and learn, and thanks for letting us play a tiny part in supporting your big and difficult role as a youth worker. We value you! We love what you do! We believe you're serving God in life-altering ways. And we're thrilled that God might use us in some small way to make you more effective.

Expectantly,

Doug & Duffy

PS: We understand that you probably already have your office shelves filled with books reminding you as a conscientious youth worker of what you should be doing, what you could be doing or what Jesus would be doing. We're not writing this book to offer you yet another reason why you don't measure up as a youth worker. Bottom Line: We're on this journey together. We hope you'll see this book not so much as ought-to, and must-do, and more along the lines of think-through and how-to. Speaking to teenagers is an adventure that we share together.

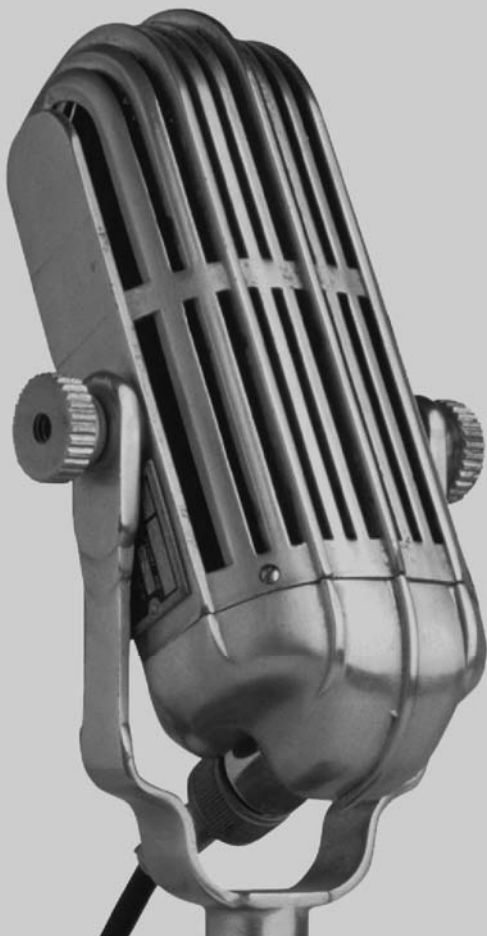
Years ago we wrote a book called, *Memory Makers* and you could read that book while you were standing in the aisle at the bookstore (we think that explains the poor sales). But, this one is different. It's going to require of you a little more work – a little more thought and careful digestion. You'll have to come back to the bookstore several times to read this book the way we hope it might be read because we want you to take some time with this stuff. In fact, here's our suggestion to you: take a chapter of this book, a cup of Starbucks and give yourself some unhurried time to dream with us about how better communication could impact your ministry. And then, even if it seems difficult, even if it moves you a little out of your comfort zone, even if it requires you to stretch some new ministry muscles, don't back away from that dream. "He who has called you is faithful and He will do it" (1 Thessalonians 5:24).

And, meanwhile, as you sip that latte and turn those pages, remember that we're cheering you on!

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# Section 1

## How to Think about Effective Messages



## “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.



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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).

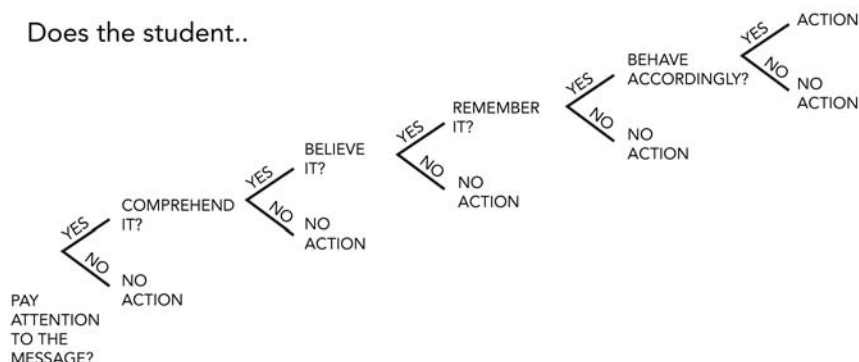


FIGURE 1-1 FROM MOUTH TO EAR TO HEART TO LIFE.  
THE OBSTACLES TO COMMUNICATION ARE REAL.

**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*,

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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.



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