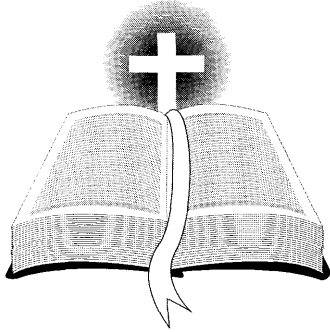


CHAPTER FIVE



H.O.P.E.—KEY INGREDIENTS IN EVERY MESSAGE OF HOPE

The church I attend was founded in the 1730s. Like many churches in the Northeast, it is surrounded by a 250-year-old graveyard, including tombstones of Revolutionary War soldiers. At the very front, along the sidewalk leading to the double doors, one tombstone marks the burial place of the church's third pastor. He preached during the First Great Awakening, in the mid 1700s. Passing his tombstone on Sunday morning, I'm reminded how churches all over the world exist, more often than not, as a legacy of some messenger of hope—a pastor, missionary, lay leader—around whom revival converged.

You Are the Message

As we've seen, anyone can be a Messenger of Hope. Our first image may be of a pastor and his preaching. And in a sense, clergy are pre-eminently such messengers. But as we're about to discover, effective ways of delivering the message of hope are equally applicable to a father or a mother facilitating family devotions at the dinner table, to someone leading an early-morning Bible study on the

Gospels, or to a layperson guiding a city-wide concert of prayer, or to a team leader studying the doctrine of the Holy Spirit with fellow missionaries during a field retreat in India. Of course, it also applies to a pastor preaching on Sunday morning.

In all of these scenarios, the delivery of the message of hope begins inside the messenger himself. To be an effective messenger, you must incarnate the message. What you deliver to others must come out of what is already inside of you. If you are struggling to find an unwavering confidence about coming revival, remember: You are as likely to believe what you preach as you are to preach what you believe. In other words, the more you choose to share the message—even in the face of your own struggles—the more the message will become a part of you and resonate within you. That can't help but make you an even more effective messenger to others.

Delivering the Message

So what does it take to deliver the message effectively? For pastors who ask, many voices claim to have the answer. A well-known school of Christian communications advertises: “Now you can improve your preaching in just five days!” An international congress on preaching in London promises that “a thousand of the world's top preachers” will be in attendance and then asks the question, “Shouldn't you be among them?” To be sure, the average preacher confronts a library of suggestions for being a more effective communicator. Scores of titles have recently been published.

Whatever suggestions are applied, the pastor (or any of us who act as messengers of hope) will not be satisfied that adequate delivery has been made until (in the words of Annie Dillard) the message helps Christians to quit being “cheerful, brainless tourists on a package tour of the Absolute.” A pastor's message on a Sunday morning, for example, should transform the hearers into believers who are “wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews.”¹ I want to give you ideas for doing this that you may not find anywhere else.

Getting Them to Listen

Of course, the first question to ask about our hearers is simple: Are any of them listening? Experts tell us that contemporary Bible teaching needs to be tighter, shorter, crisper, and more relevant. The glut of information coming at the TV generation is at such a rapid rate of transmission that *pacing* in Bible teaching is everything. Pastors are warned that sermons need to have new patterns because many in our audiences are “mosaic thinkers,” putting ideas together in new configurations. These people resonate much more with visionary preaching but are also eager for a dialogical approach in which they can participate in the process of arriving at the truths together.²

The Four Ingredients

In a recent interview with Bob Buford, head of Texas-based Buford Television Incorporated, the question was asked: “How can preachers [or any messenger for Christ] connect with business leaders in their message?” Buford’s answer was quite telling, useful for any agent of revival! He outlined four stages:

The first stage is *connection*. You help the listener to connect with you, as the messenger, and with the real-life situations that are the context for your message.

The second stage is *Scripture*. Now you connect biblical truth with the personal context within which you have set the hearer.

The third stage is *application*. Businesspeople live in an action-oriented world. They want specific action steps spelled out for them. What can they do right now?

The fourth stage is *vehicle*. You should be even more specific, spelling out a practical step that the listener can take as soon as the message is finished.³

What struck me as I read the interview was how closely Buford’s analysis parallels the four key ingredients for delivering a message

of hope. Buford called them connection, Scripture, application, and vehicle. I call them H.O.P.E.:

- Hop on
- Open up
- Pray back
- Enter in

They represent how I have delivered the vision for nearly twenty years.

To spell it out more specifically, an effective Messenger of Hope helps the listeners:

Hop on—by getting them “up to speed” on what God has done before in revival, as well as what he is doing in revival today.

Open up—by teaching them from the Scriptures the promises and ways of God in revivals and explaining why we have every reason to hope for a similar work in our generation.

Pray back—by helping them to pray the message of revival back to God right away, asking him to bring it about just as he promised in his Word.

Enter in—by motivating and equipping them to take one or two practical steps toward preparing for and becoming involved in the coming revival for which we hope and pray.

It is my thesis that these four ingredients need to be a part of every message of hope. Although it's not necessary, there is some logic in following the very order suggested by the acronym H.O.P.E.

As an example, imagine a father is leading his family in evening devotions. He has just ten minutes. He begins by recounting for a minute or two a story he just got off the Internet through the Web site called “Religion News Today.” He recounts how a group of pastors in Spokane, Washington, just finished spending forty days in prayer and total fasting. He describes what this must have been like and then reports that a whole new surge of evangelism out of their churches has resulted. (*Hop on.*) Next, he has one of his older chil-

dren read the short account in 2 Chronicles 15 of what God did through Asa and the revival movement he instigated for Jerusalem. (*Open up.*) Third, he invites his wife and ten-year-old daughter to each pray a short sentence prayer, inviting God to work in their hearts and in their church with new empowerment in ministry, so that they may see others come to Christ as well. (*Pray back.*) Finally, all five in the circle agree to look for one opportunity to speak of Christ to a non-Christian friend within the next twenty-four hours. They'll make this effort as a preliminary step toward what they hope God will do in greater measure with them when he gives the kind of revival they have asked him for tonight. They agree to share the results at tomorrow's dinner. (*Enter in.*)

For the second scenario, travel to a Sunday morning worship service. The pastor has forty minutes in which to preach. Taking H.O.P.E. as his guide, he arbitrarily divides his time into four ten-minute segments. They might run something like this:

Hop on—He shares reports on what God is doing locally, nationally, and internationally to incite Christ's church toward revival. (Later in this book you'll find a number of resources for such information.) His final story tells about the faithfulness of Bible teachers in the revival in China. This prepares his audience for the text.

Open up—Next he preaches expositionally from his text, 2 Corinthians 1:8–11. He tells about a God who raises the dead, even in the most hopeless situations, pressing home the point that what God did for Paul he is doing throughout the church right now in early phases of revival. God is willing to do this in our own congregation, he reassures.

Pray back—Now, for another ten minutes he encourages the congregation to pray back through the passage, verse by verse, in small groups of six, formed all through the sanctuary. Suggesting points for prayer all along the way, he gives them about two minutes apiece on each one. He shapes the final minute with a responsive prayer printed in the bulletin.

Enter in—Finally, the pastor challenges them to spend the coming week watching for evidence of God at work, showing res-

urrection power in the midst of seeming impossibilities. This may be manifested in their own lives or in reports they hear from other places. In addition, they are challenged to bring one account with them the next week, in order to share briefly with others either in Sunday school or at the beginning of worship.

To help make all of this more specific, at the end of this chapter is a worksheet entitled “Developing Your Own Message of Hope.” You may want to study it briefly before going on to the next chapter. Also, plan to refer back to it as you work on your own message of hope, drawing on suggestions and resources in the final four chapters of this book.

My conviction is that the four ingredients—H.O.P.E.—need to be a part of your message of hope everywhere you share it, with every kind of group, and all the time. That’s what makes it a real *life*-message.

Immediate Results

As you do share the message of hope, expect immediate results. *Immediate? Is that possible?* Consider:

H—God cannot lead us on the basis of facts we do not have! The more facts you give to get people “up to speed,” the more God has to work with to transform listeners into prisoners of hope and to lead them into the promise of revival.

O—The Scriptures are clear; faith comes by hearing God’s Word (Rom. 10:17). The more we share this fresh perspective on the Scriptures, unfolding the scope and breadth of hope that permeates his Word, the easier will be the Holy Spirit’s job to ignite victorious faith in prisoners of hope. God’s Word never returns unproductive (compare Isa. 55:10–11 and Luke 8:11–15).

P—We serve a prayer-answering God, especially when we pray his very Word back to him (1 John 5:14–15). Praying over a message of hope gets believers to raise up prayers they have never uttered before. Such praying transforms the pray-ers; it also transforms the world for which we pray. The results begin



immediately in the hearts of hearers who pray sincerely and multiply as God answers prayers for revival in days to come.

E—The more prepared and open God's people are to receive a greater work of God in revival, the more quickly God can move to answer their prayers. In fact, steps of preparation for revival are, in many ways, the very first phase of the revival for which we hope.

I do not share these four ingredients as a foolproof formula. Nor is H.O.P.E. simply a gimmick. This approach is how I've delivered the message of hope for many years to audiences around the world, whether few or large in number. It has taken shape for me over time, and has worked in real-life challenges.

One thing I can tell you with certainty: These four ingredients are so incredibly potent because I have always insisted that my central message is not ultimately a message of revival. Rather, I have tried to focus my message preeminently on the person of Christ. He is what the coming revival is all about. He is its source and its goal. Our effectiveness to herald a comprehensive vision of Christ is what allows us to succeed as agents of revival. It happens too infrequently in too many churches. But this is the most important, the most practical of all principles for delivering our message.