

God is in the Small Print

Even in this high-tech age, the lowly gospel tract still delivers a powerful message.

Josephine was walking to the abortion clinic in her war-torn West African city when she was forced to dive to the ground to avoid gunfire. As she lifted her head, she saw a dirty piece of paper—which turned out to be a gospel tract printed in America. After reading it, she changed her mind about having an abortion and rushed home in tears, where she begged God's forgiveness. Josephine has since launched a crisis-pregnancy ministry.

Mary, a schoolteacher in the United States, often left tracts on her desk for her students. A lawyer on the school board fought to have her fired because of her overt witness.

In an uncomfortable twist, Mary found herself sitting next to the hostile board member at a funeral service. She felt compelled to hand him a tract—the only tract in her purse—one written by a Christian attorney. Soon afterward, when the board member's daughter joined her class, Mary suggested that perhaps the student should be reassigned.

"That won't be necessary," the girl responded. "My dad has accepted Jesus as his Savior."

Across oceans and continents, real testimonies such as these abound—stories from people convicted of their sins and drawn to Jesus through the simple, paper gospel tract. Since their "invention" in the late 1700s, tracts have been distributed by the gazillions in dozens, perhaps hundreds, of languages and

have reached even the remotest and most unlikely locations.

In the United States tracts continue to evolve to capture the imagination of an increasingly media-savvy public. Though many pre-1980s tracts presented sin and salvation in preachy, fire-and-brimstone style—with words such as “wrath” and “damnation” leaping off the pages—many modern tracts take a softer, more sophisticated approach.

Not surprisingly, tract writers have different ideas when it comes to presenting—or “marketing”—the gospel. But nearly all agree that even in today’s world of sophisticated softies, the bottom line is: Everyone needs to be confronted with their sinful condition and shown the way of salvation through the cross of Christ.

On Being ‘Seeker Insensitive’

The beauty of tracts is that people can pick them up anywhere—on countertops, inside library books, on buses and trains. The Holy Spirit even uses tracts tossed out as trash, as He did in Josephine’s case. At least one tract is designed to be dropped strategically on a sidewalk to catch the eye of a passerby (see “Little Paper, Big Message” on page 54).

Yet in this era of impersonal e-mailing and declining face-to-face communicating, tract evangelism also offers opportunities for old-fashioned, eye-to-eye contact. Tracts are conversation-starters. Many Christians insist there’s no substitute for the personal connection.

Before getting too carried away with evangelistic fervor, however, there’s a snag to note: Most believers are more

likely to hand out garage-sale flyers than gospel tracts. In fact, the late Bill Bright, founder of Campus Crusade for Christ, claimed that a mere 2 percent of American Christians (about one in 50) regularly share their faith.

What's the problem?

"Fear," says tract evangelist Ray Comfort, founder of Southern California-based Living Waters Publications. "Fear of rejection and ridicule."

Comfort is one of those scary individuals who actually enjoy passing out tracts. Minutes before interviewing with this reporter, he was tackling his mailman with God's message.

"Have you seen The Passion [of the Christ]?" he asked the unsuspecting postal worker.

"Uh, I'm in a hurry," the carrier replied.

"I'll walk with you to your van," Comfort persisted.

Within the next 90 seconds, Comfort had gently shared the way of salvation with the man.

"I am not going to be obnoxious, but I am going to be as stubborn as an ox," Comfort, a native New Zealander, explained to Charisma. "There's nothing as important as someone's eternal salvation."

However, one of the most common criticisms of tract evangelism

is that it's too in-your-face.

"Jesus was the most in-your-face evangelist ever," Comfort responds. "I've never said to anyone, 'Woe unto you, you hypocrite!' but Jesus did. Look at Paul and the other apostles. They were as seeker insensitive as you can get."

OK, but isn't handing out tracts just for extroverts?

"The Bible gives the analogy that we are like firefighters, pulling people from the flames," he says. "I have known the shyest people to be the most compassionate evangelists."

Well, surely honest fear is a good excuse?

"Many people live for the thrill and the fear of rollercoasters or of bungee jumping, but they say they're too afraid to give out a tract; too fearful to pass along the only message that can save people from hell. How ridiculous is that?" Comfort fires back.

But you're an evangelist. What about the rest of us?

"I consider myself to be an ordinary, biblical Christian. Only when I compare myself with most Christians in America today do I consider myself to be 'abnormal'—and I think that's tragic," Comfort concludes.

Anointed Paper?

Still, so-called ordinary Christians hand out millions of

tracts every year. In July, Jews for Jesus (JFJ) expected to hand out 1 million tracts in New York City alone. Globally, its workers have passed out more than 40 million tracts one-on-one.

“You’d think that [after] 24 years, handing out tracts would be easy,” says JFJ director David Brickner. “It isn’t for me. I still get that tightening in my stomach.”

Yet Brickner believes few other methods of evangelism are as powerful as passing out tracts. “When we put on our Jews for Jesus T-shirts and stand on street corners or in subway stations handing out tracts, we are declaring the wisdom of God,” he states.

Estimating that 25 percent of the people who take tracts from JFJ members discard them without a glance, Brickner cites Jesus’ parable of the sower, saying: “We sow our [tracts] as seed [because] each tract contains the Word of God.”

That sentiment is echoed by veteran tract writer Jack Chick, whose cartoon-style booklets have become icons. They actually are in the Smithsonian Institution as symbols of American religious pop culture. Chick’s most popular tracts—such as *This Was Your Life!* featuring the Grim Reaper—have drawn thousands, perhaps millions, to Christ.

“[Our] tracts are full of Scripture straight from the King James Bible,” Chick told *Charisma*. “God says: ‘So shall My Word be that goeth forth out of My mouth: it shall not return unto Me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it.’ [See Is. 55:11, KJV.]

“I am in prayer for the Lord’s leading on which tracts to write. God gives me the stories, and then I pray over every tract from beginning to end,” Chick explains. “God called me to this ministry, and He has blessed and anointed it.”

During the last 40 years, Southern California-based Chick Publications has sold more than 500 million of Chick’s tracts worldwide, making him perhaps the most widely read underground author in history. In the early years, Chick had a hard time getting Christian bookstores to stock his “revolutionary” gospel tracts.

“[They] were outraged at some guy using cartoons to present the gospel,” Chick recalls. “They thought it was sacrilegious.”

Today collectors reportedly are willing to pay as much as \$500 for one of Chick’s rarest tracts. Negative criticism of the use of tracts—in fact, of any evangelistic approach—is almost inevitable.

Chick’s hard-line and hell-bound sinner approach has drawn stinging criticism and scorn from some Christians and nonbelievers alike. Critics charge that some of Chick’s tracts, such as ones that attack Roman Catholicism and Islam, are confrontational, judgmental, even insulting.

Even Dwight L. Moody, the great 19th century crusade evangelist and scholar, was once criticized by a woman who told him that she didn’t like his method of evangelism.

An Assorted, Spirited Bunch

So, who uses tracts? They're a plucky band from all walks of life, from undergraduates to undertakers, from actors to roofers, from the famous to the obscure.

Actor Kirk Cameron, a Christian best known for his roles as Mike Seaver in the sitcom *Growing Pains* and Buck Williams in *Left Behind: The Movie*, has a passion for tracts.

"Maybe, like me, you have thought that passing out gospel tracts might do more harm than good," Cameron, 34, writes in *The Way of the Master*, co-authored by Comfort. "Since I've become passionate about reaching the lost, I've realized that the gospel on paper is infinitely better than no gospel at all.

"I hand out tracts as often as I can and say: 'This is for you. I'd really appreciate it if you'd take the time to read it. It has a gospel message inside.' It may not be as good as a personal conversation, but at least it allows me to share the gospel with gentleness and respect."

Equally passionate about saving lost souls is Rich Carroll, a 49-year-old roofer who lives in Southern California. He has handed out thousands of tracts during the last 30 years. "When we sow the seed, we give the Holy Spirit the opportunity to work," he says.

But people don't want tracts foisted on them by someone resembling a pushy used-car salesman, Carroll cautions.

"We can come across as being just out to get people to say the sinner's prayer," he observes. "I ask people what they think about Jesus—and I listen to them."

Joe Staniforth, 37, a teacher from Sun City, California, says the moment he takes a step to reach out to the lost he feels the presence of the Holy Spirit.

“When you pass out a tract, God is not only working through you, He’s working in you, too,” Staniforth says.

Of course, tracts can be used any time, anywhere, but certain events trigger their activity profusely.

When Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ* hit movie theaters earlier this year, the American Tract Society (ATS) distributed 3.1 million *Passion* tracts in six weeks. They rank among the most popular tracts in the Texas-based organization’s 180-year history, according to marketing director Mark Brown.

Major life-changing events, such as September 11, provoke a flurry of tract evangelism. American Tract Society’s *America Under Attack*—hurriedly produced in response to September 11—sold more than 3.5 million copies in a month.

The most popular period for tracts to be distributed is Halloween. This year ATS expected to sell up to 5 million Halloween-theme tracts aimed at trick-or-treaters.

Timeless Words, New Frontiers

Far from showing signs of becoming old-fashioned or passé, the use of paper tracts is definitely increasing, Brown of ATS marketing says.

“Ten years ago, we were told that with the arrival of the Internet, printed materials would diminish,” he told Charisma. “Since then, we have grown every year.”

The Internet is actually expanding tract horizons with “digi-tracts,” or digital tracts, and e-tracts, both of which can be downloaded and sent via e-mail.

In many parts of the world, the influence of tracts is far-reaching. Gospel for Asia (GFA) reports thousands of conversions as a direct result of tracts finding their way into remote villages, often where people have never heard the gospel or seen a Bible.

The true, eternal impact of the simple, paper tract may never be known. Some of the greatest names in church history, such as missionary Hudson Taylor and evangelist George Whitefield, became Christians after reading tracts.

As the fiery English preacher Charles Spurgeon observed: “How many thousands have been carried to heaven instrumentally upon the wings of these tracts, none can tell.”

LITTLE Paper, BigMESSAGE

Christians serious about reaching the lost have come up with a myriad of ways to get the job done. Using tracts is only one method—but a unique one. Tracts circulating out there range from the terrific to the ingenious to the downright cheesy. Charisma ranked six of the best.

6. The Atheist Test Enough to confound even the most ardent atheist, this nifty little tract logically counters the theory of evolution and convincingly argues the case for a Creator God. It's adapted from God Doesn't Believe in Atheists by evangelist Ray Comfort.

Living Waters Publications

5. Steps to Peace With God An oldie but goodie. Penned by evangelist Billy Graham, this straight shooter clearly articulates step-by-step the way of salvation. Judging by its success (it's a yearly million-seller), tract users agree that this one is a real gem.

American Tract Society

4. The Passion of the Christ Wow! Greg Laurie's Passion tract is almost as powerful as the movie! This classy tract centers on the last words spoken by Christ as He hung on the cross. A real spine-tingler.

American Tract Society

3. Did the Butterfly Evolve? Not one for jumpy types. Open this card-style tract and a windup butterfly zips out. Sure makes you jump! This innovative tract claims there are 20,000 butterfly species—a detail revealing the creative genius of God and His intricate plan of salvation.

Living Waters Publications

2. The Wallet Stealth evangelism at its best. What better way to get someone's attention than a wallet stuffed with \$50 bills! Looking at it on a sidewalk from a few feet away, this tract looks like an authentic wallet. Perfect for anyone who's

too chicken to hand out a tract face-to-face.

Living Waters Publications

1. This Was Your Life! Love them or hate them, the hard-hitting cartoon-style tracts from Jack Chick have won thousands to Christ—and this multimillion-seller ranks as perhaps the all-time classic. Featuring the Grim Reaper and a Judgment Day scenario that brings on a clammy sweat, this is Chick at his most inspired.

Chick Publications

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