



GOSPEL CONVERSATIONS REIMAGINED

A Missional Framework for Today

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Gospel Conversations Reimagined: A Missional Framework for Today

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CHAPTER 1

*Recontextualizing Evangelism for a
Twenty-First-Century Context*

In 2022, I celebrated my fortieth year of full-time ministry. I had placed my faith in Christ between my freshman and sophomore year of college. Soon after, I joined Campus Crusade for Christ (CCC, now Cru) at the University of Utah, where I received training on how to present the gospel using *Four Spiritual Laws*, a simple, four-point outline that explains the message of salvation. *Four Spiritual Laws*, developed by CCC founder, Bill Bright (1921–2003), and published in 1964, has been translated into innumerable languages and distributed to billions of people worldwide. I have always loved to share my faith and often carried a stack of *Four Spiritual Laws* with me wherever I went, and I was confident in my approach—that is, until a few years ago, when I met a college freshman at Portland State University (PSU).

Twenty-First-Century Shifts

On a fall afternoon, a PSU student and I decided to see if we could find someone who would be willing to answer some questions on our religious survey. I had taken hundreds of surveys like this one over the years and looked forward to finding someone with whom to speak. We approached a student in the cafeteria who was willing

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to take our survey. She was attending college in the heart of downtown Portland, but she grew up on a farm in central Oregon. We asked her the first question on the survey, “Who, in your opinion, is Jesus Christ?” Her whole demeanor immediately changed. Suddenly confused and bewildered, she replied, “I have no idea what you are talking about.”

Furthermore, her answers to the rest of the survey questions indicated that she knew nothing about God or the Bible. I recall thinking, “How is it possible that a quintessential farm girl raised in America has never heard of Jesus?” Her faltering answers to Cru’s standard religious survey rattled the foundation of my confidence, especially as I continued to encounter people who hesitated or declined to talk about God. This type of response threw me off balance and tempted me to either stop taking the initiative or stop sharing the gospel altogether.

Instead, God slowly turned my confusion into curiosity, and I began to do some research to better understand more about *Four Spiritual Laws*, the evangelistic tract I had used for over three decades. I knew that Bill Bright led the charge in promoting personal evangelism and personal evangelism training in the mid-twentieth century, but I never considered what exactly compelled him to write the tract. I ended up devoting my master’s and PhD studies to researching this phenomenon to better understand Bright’s mid-century context and to consider relevant ways to engage in what I now describe as “meaningful gospel conversations.”¹

God began bringing people into my life who shared my confusion and disorientation. We banded together and formed an

¹ Cas Monaco, “Bill Bright’s (1921–2003) *Four Spiritual Laws* Reimagined: A Narrative Approach to Meaningful Gospel Conversations for an American Twenty-First-Century Secularized Context.” PhD diss., Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2020, xv.

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“Evangelism Think Tank” to help us learn in community. Among other things, we discovered that today’s context stands in sharp contrast to America’s mid-twentieth-century context from which emerged most of the evangelism methodologies still used by many evangelicals today, including *Four Spiritual Laws*.

When I joined the CCC staff in 1982, Bill Bright was at the helm. He often told us about his childhood in Coweta, Oklahoma, and frequently reminisced about his move to Hollywood, California, and subsequent conversion. He referred to Henrietta Mears, her consequent impact on his life, and her influence related to the founding of CCC. He never tired of casting vision for the fulfillment of the Great Commission and the significance of *Four Spiritual Laws*. It was easy to feel like I knew the story already, but to answer my question, “Why *Four Spiritual Laws*?” I would have to probe more deeply.

In the following sections I provide a brief synopsis of my findings. First, I provide a summary of Bright’s life, including his upbringing and conversion. Second, I consider certain factors that lend insight into Bright’s context from the vantage point of theology, history, and sociology. I also provide a summary of Henrietta Mears’s influence in Bright’s life and her impact on mid-twentieth-century evangelicalism. Third, I demonstrate the impact of these influences on Bright’s vision for CCC, his strategy for fulfilling the Great Commission, and the force of this strategy that impacted his, and our, approach to evangelism. Fourth, I introduce a variety of ways he practiced contextualization through innovation. I wrap up this chapter by proposing that, just as Bright practiced contextualization in the mid-twentieth century, we need to do the same in the twenty-first century.

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Understanding Bill Bright's Context

Bright's Upbringing

William R. Bright (1921–2003), born and raised on the cusp of the Great Depression, grew up on a ranch near Coweta, Oklahoma, in a home with no running water or electricity. Bright's character and work ethic, shaped by his saintly mother's prayers and honed by his hard-driving father, fueled his leadership and lifelong entrepreneurial determination.

Bill's grandfather, Samuel Bright, who benefited financially from the Oklahoma oil boom (1901–1905), purchased thousands of acres of land for his sons, including the 5,000-acre ranch where Bright was raised. Michael Richardson notes, "Samuel Bright . . . was one of the brave souls who . . . saddled up for the great land-grant rushes between 1889 and 1895 that had so transformed the Indian Territory."² Bill's father, Forrest Dale Bright, and grandfather both modeled a commitment to public service and politics by their active involvement in the Republican Party of Wagoner County, Oklahoma. When the Brights hosted evening events for gubernatorial and congressional candidates, Bill regularly presided as Master of Ceremonies.

Bright graduated with honors from Northeastern State University in Tahlequah, Oklahoma, in 1944. In that same year, three years after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, Bill enlisted in the army, but was disqualified due to a lingering football injury. Undeterred, he headed to Hollywood to enlist a second time, hoping the military might overlook his injury, but again to no avail.

² Michael Richardson, *Amazing Faith: The Authorized Biography of Bill Bright* (Colorado Springs: WaterBrook, 2000), 292.

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Bright's Conversion

After the disappointment of being turned down by the military again, Bright decided to start his own business, “Bright’s California Confections.”³ During this time, he described himself as an agnostic, “not knowing whether God existed and not really caring if He did.”⁴ With the so-called good life as his goal, he believed, like his father and grandfather before him, that “a man can do anything he wants to do, on his own.”⁵ Providentially, on his first night in Los Angeles Bright picked up a hitchhiker who happened to be the founder of The Navigators, Dawson Trotman. He encouraged Bill to join him at a birthday celebration honoring his friend Daniel Fuller. In the years to come, both Daniel and his father, Charles E. Fuller, the founder of Fuller Seminary, would play an important role in Bill’s life and ministry.

Bright’s California landlords attended First Presbyterian Church of Hollywood (FPCH) and frequently invited him to attend church. Now and then, he recalled, he would show up on a Sunday morning and sit in the back row, until one day he agreed to attend a party sponsored by the FPCH College Department. He remembers being surprised by the turnout. The people there were unexpectedly friendly and outgoing, materially wealthy, and successful, but, even more unexpected, they loved Jesus Christ and claimed that nothing compared to knowing him.

Before long, Bright began attending FPCH’s college class and met Henrietta Mears (1890–1963), FPCH’s Director of Christian Education and the College Department. One Sunday in 1945, Mears described Paul’s conversion on the road to Damascus and

³ Richardson, 18.

⁴ Bill Bright, *Come Help Change the World* (Peachtree, GA: Bright Media Foundation and Campus Crusade for Christ, 1999), loc. 197, Kindle.

⁵ Bright, loc. 187.

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challenged her audience to consider this question: “Who are you, Lord, and what will you have me to do?” Bright, later that evening, knelt before God and prayed. “[I] asked the question with which Dr. Mears had challenged us.... Through my study I now believed that Jesus Christ was the Son of God, that he died for my sin, and that, as Dr. Mears had shared with us, if I invited him into my life as Savior and Lord, he would come in.”⁶ Soon Mears recognized Bright’s zeal and natural leadership style and appointed him Sunday school president. Within a few short years, Vonette Zachary (1926–2015), Bright’s skeptical fiancée, experienced conversion after hearing Mears’s rational explanation of the gospel. Bill and Vonette were married in 1948.

Historical, Theological, and Sociological Influences

My research also led me to consider the historical foundations of Bill Bright’s theology, which, as I discovered, traced back to the seventeenth-century Great Awakenings and revivalism. In the seventeenth century, revivalism came to be characterized by crisis conversion, sacrifice, and surrender. By the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century, revivalism included a heightened commitment to evangelism and foreign missions, especially among Protestants.

In 1792, William Carey, a Particular Baptist pastor and long-time missionary to India, came to prominence through his seminal document, “An Enquiry into the Obligation of Christians to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathens.”⁷ In it, Carey argues that the Great Commission (Matt 28:18–20), a binding call for every Christian, provided the impetus for the spread of the gospel. Up until the eighteenth

⁶ Bright, loc. 237.

⁷ William Carey, *An Enquiry into the Obligation of Christians to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathens* (London: The Carey Kingsgate Press Limited, 1792).

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century, it was generally held that the Great Commission had applied only to the apostles, but Carey contends that every Christian is obligated to help fulfill the Great Commission. Subsequently, Carey, often described by Protestants as the Father of Modern Missions,⁸ developed freestanding mission societies and systems for volunteerism. These systems propelled foreign missions into a new era described by missiologists as The Great Century of Missions.⁹

By the late nineteenth century, a “premillennial urgency” subordinated evangelistic concern to crisis conversion, soul saving, and practical Christianity.¹⁰ D. L. Moody, a revivalist and significant contributor to the emerging fundamentalist movement, also emphasized the fulfilling of the Great Commission.¹¹ His vision included church cooperation among different denominations and connecting revivalism to social reform, evidenced in part by his efforts to

⁸ William Carey’s contribution to the modern missions movement and his interpretation of the Great Commission have greatly impacted missions. David J. Bosch describes Carey as one of the many figures from that period who set out to “[Propagate] the Gospel Among the Heathen; . . . he was . . . as much a product as a shaper of the spirit of the time.” *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, American Society of Missiology Series, no. 16 (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991, 2011), 286. Craig Van Gelder and Dwight J. Zscheile describe Carey as one among many figures to contribute to the missions movement. *Participating in God’s Mission: A Theological Missiology for the Church in America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018), 113.

⁹ Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of the Expansion of Christianity*, vol. 6 (New York: Harper and Row, 1937), 443. Notably, Paul E. Pierson, in “Colonialism and Missions,” *EDWM* 209, adds that this era was rooted in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century revivalism and emphasized both evangelism and vigorous humanitarianism.

¹⁰ Joel A. Carpenter, *Revive Us Again: The Reawakening of American Fundamentalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 248.

¹¹ C. T. McIntire, in “Fundamentalism,” *EDT* 472, defines fundamentalism as: “A movement that arose in the United States during and immediately after World War I to reaffirm orthodox Protestant Christianity and defend against liberal theology, German higher criticism, Darwinism, and other ideologies regarded as harmful.”

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care for poverty-stricken children. Importantly, his commitment to evangelism catalyzed the Student Volunteer Movement (under the leadership of John R. Mott) and rallied around “the evangelization of the world in this generation.”¹² Bosch observes, “As revivalism and evangelicalism slowly adopted premillennialism, the emphasis shifted away from social involvement to exclusively verbal evangelism.”¹³

Moody’s premillennial urgency is illustrated by his watchword, “I look upon this world as a wrecked vessel. God has given me a lifeboat and said to me, ‘Moody, save all you can.’”¹⁴ The ravages of WWI in the early twentieth century and the devastation wrought by WWII in the mid-twentieth century served to accentuate this urgency.

As I noted earlier, Bright placed his faith in Christ in 1945, the same year WWII came to an end. The US and global contexts at the time included the horrors of the Holocaust, the use of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the ensuing Cold War with Russia. An estimated 70–85 million people, roughly 3 percent of the world population in 1940, lost their lives because of WWII. In an American context, the end of the war included the end of Japanese American internment and the rise of the civil rights movement. The civil rights movement, then just beginning, challenged the Jim Crow laws that firmly reinforced the strict segregation then in place. Significant for Bright, the postwar context also brought with it the palpable threat of communism.

The population in the United States at the time of the 1940 census was just under 90 percent white and 10 percent African

¹² John R. Mott, *The Evangelization of the World in This Generation* (New York: Student Volunteer Movement, 1901), 1.

¹³ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 325.

¹⁴ Timothy K. Beougher, “Moody, Dwight Lyman,” *EDWM* 657.

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American. In 1951, according to Gallup, 66 percent of America's population identified as Protestant, 24 percent as Catholic, and 4 percent as Jewish.¹⁵ Of note, most of the evangelism tools and training conservative evangelicals are familiar with today emerged in this predominantly white, Protestant religious context.¹⁶

With this post-WWII American context in mind, we turn back to a Sunday school training conference, held at Forest Home Conference Center in 1947. Henrietta Mears, having just returned to California after traveling across war-torn Europe, described her firsthand witness of the catastrophic damage resulting from the fight against Hitler's Naziism. She sounded a sober and urgent call for evangelism: "During the war, men of special courage were called upon for difficult assignments; often these volunteers did not return. They were called 'expendables.' We must be [men and women of total commitment] expendables for Christ . . . [and] if we fail God's call tonight, we will be held responsible."¹⁷ Bill Bright, Louis Evans Jr., and Richard Halverson responded to Mears's call that night, and

¹⁵ Gallup, "Religion: Survey of American's population from 1948–2014," <https://news.gallup.com/poll/1690/religion.aspx>, n.p. This survey records responses to various questions, including the following: "What is your religious preference—are you Protestant, Roman Catholic, Mormon, Jewish, Muslim, another religion, or no religion?"

¹⁶ Notable tools and approaches to evangelism developed in the mid-twentieth century by evangelicals include: (1) Dawson Trotman's (Founder of The Navigators) "Bridge to Life" in 1933 and subsequent discipleship materials that focused on helping new believers understand their conversion decision, <https://www.navigators.org/about/history/>; (2) The Billy Graham Evangelistic Association developed products and approaches to evangelism in the 1940s and 1950s that provided teaching and training following his revivals and radio program, *Hour of Decision*, <https://billygraham.org/news/media-resources/electronic-press-kit/bgea-history/history/>; (3) James Kennedy's "Evangelism Explosion" and the five "Kennedy questions," developed in 1962, also provided a specific approach to evangelism: <https://evangelismexplosion.org/50-years-2-questions-millions-brought-to-jesus-part-1/>.

¹⁷ Richardson, *Amazing Faith*, 37.

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in the shadow of WWII, they fanned the flames of the “Mid-Century Revival.”¹⁸ Before we examine the extent to which this revival impacted Bright’s trajectory, let me provide, first, an overview of Henrietta Mears’s background and theology.

Henrietta Mears

The more I studied Bright’s mid-twentieth-century context, the more I realized the scope of Henrietta Mears’s impact on his life. In fact, the foundation for Bright’s ministry philosophy, and the evangelism tool *Four Spiritual Laws*, rested on her evangelical theology and revivalist influences. Notably, Mears’s influential reach extended from FPCH to various prominent evangelical institutions including Princeton University, Fuller Seminary, and the National Association of Evangelicals. Her teaching and training curriculum reflected her evangelical and Protestant traditions, her commitment to the inerrancy of Scripture, and expository teaching. Mears emphasized spiritual regeneration, repentance from sin, and faith in Jesus Christ. She encouraged every believer to actively share the gospel, to engage in world missions, and to help to fulfill the Great Commission. Significantly, Wesleyan Holiness Theology and the Keswick Convention

¹⁸ J. Edwin Orr, *The Second Evangelical Awakening in America* (London: Marshall, Morgan, and Scott, 1952). Scholars hold various points of view on the veracity of the Great Awakenings. These references are included for more information. Joe Butler, “Enthusiasm Described and Decried: The Great Awakening as Interpretive Fiction,” *JAH* 69, no. 2 (1982); Thomas Kidd, in *The Great Awakening: The Roots of Evangelical Christianity in Colonial America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), argues for one continuous awakening between the 1730s and 1780s. J. Edwin Orr, *The Flaming Tongue: The Impact of Twentieth Century Revivals* (Chicago: Moody, 1973); “Hidden Springs,” Lecture, 1963, location and exact date unknown, Campus Crusade for Christ Archives, Orlando, FL, contends for a mid-twentieth-century awakening with painstaking attention to detail. Orr played an influential role in Bright’s life and in CCC, and I follow Orr’s timeline.