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## Chapter 1

# MESSIOLOGY

When I first wrote *Out of the Comfort Zone*, one of my greatest hopes was to see a reawakening of grace, especially among those involved in global missions.

Again and again we hear of tensions among those working to reach the world with the gospel. Many local churches go through very heavy and complex divisions. This is why I believe we desperately need a theology of “messiology.”

Put simply, *messiology* is the idea that God in His patience, mercy, and passion to bring men and women to Himself often does great things in the midst of a mess. That is not an excuse for sin or failure; every Christian should strive to avoid making a mess. But it’s the other side of the coin.

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It's God's way of working in spite of (actually, by means of!) the messes we make to bring about His plan and purposes. I sometimes refer to this as "radical grace." Large portions of Acts and the majority of the epistles demonstrate this.

Throughout the Scriptures, we see God working through all kinds of messy situations. For years I have quoted a personal proverb: "Where two or three are gathered together in His Name, sooner or later there will be a mess." Almost always the congregation laughs. I then ask, "How many have experienced that?" and most hands go up.

Gordon MacDonald's book *Rebuilding Your Broken World*, along with many other great books, has helped me develop this theology of *messiology*. It has helped me understand God and His work more than almost anything else.

Over the course of fifty-seven years in over ninety countries and thousands of churches and other organizations, I have often observed some kind of mess within them. Sometimes clear sin is involved that needs to be repented of. Other times it is just silly stuff. I have said, and I feel it strongly, that no matter how filled we are with the Holy Spirit, we are still human. Our humanness has its beautiful side and its messy side.

I admire many Christian leaders, and try to have a grace-awakened attitude toward all of them, but many of

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us (including me) do ridiculous things and say even more ridiculous things. Yet as I have observed more carefully, I have seen God working in the midst of it. I have even seen many people used of God who were clearly living in sin at the same time. We have all heard of pastors being used of God—their churches growing with people being saved and disciplined—and yet it is later discovered that they were living in adultery and unfaithfulness all that time. These are married pastors with children. Of course, after some time, their sin usually finds them out and the consequences fall like dominoes: they are fired, disqualified from church leadership, sometimes divorced, and so on. But years later, I sometimes meet with the person and his new wife and discover them being used in ministry. If I wrote a book about that, I could give hundreds of similar examples. This is messiology in action!

When it comes to messiology, some other key words are *mystery* and *mercy*. The last verses of Romans 11 have helped me again and again:

*Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways!* (v. 33 NASB; see also vv. 34–36)

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The hardest thing for some people—especially leaders—to understand is that God can work in a mighty way through someone with wrong theology. How can this be? I meet people who are upset with certain televangelists. Many people tell me that they will not even watch them. I agree with these criticisms. Things I have seen and heard on “Christian” TV make me weep, especially the deceptive fund-raising tricks that some TV preachers employ. But do not be surprised when you get to heaven and meet hundreds of thousands who came to Christ through these ministries. Do we need more of the apostle Paul’s attitude as shown in Philippians 1:15–18? It is both clear and hard to accept that God uses ministries and people that we may want nothing to do with. He uses preachers and ministries that I would not even send a dollar to. We want to explain these things and try to fit them in our box, but they will not fit! The answer—*messiology*.

Another area where things get very messy is in the whole area of finance and funding for mission fields, people, and projects. Periodic stories about the misuse of funds in missions prevent some people from sending any money at all to worthy causes. I am convinced that history will show that the generosity and risk of supporting a project (like a school) thousands of miles away have been major factors in taking

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the gospel forward and establishing His church.

Some people will not support a new school or other similar projects if they do not see how it can be self-supporting right away. But this thinking is misguided because, in places like India, self-supporting schools have been popular for many years, and as a result there are very few good schools for the poor (generally Dalits or tribal people), but thousands of schools available for those who can pay. In the complex situation of extreme poverty, we must expect to put a lot of money in before a school can sustain itself. In the case of some schools it may not be until a couple of decades—when people who graduate from these schools have jobs—that they can be self-sustaining. It's hard to even imagine what we are up against in India with almost 300 million locked into the extreme poverty of untouchability. These exceptional situations, and there are many around the world, call for exceptional generosity.

That doesn't mean we should not exercise discernment and research with regard to all that we give. We need the right people on the field to handle the finance, and the project itself is the most important factor of all. But those who think that they wasted money on a project that went totally wrong may discover many great results of their giving when they get to heaven.

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In all of this we need to have wisdom, common sense, and especially beware of what I call *destructive idealism*—the perfectionistic expectations many of us have, which can cause discouragement, disunity, and confusion. A little more wisdom, patience, and humility would go a long way in taking us into greater reality and victory.

## Chapter 2

# FIRE EXTINGUISHERS, BOOKS, AND PROVERBS

One of my many failures during the early days of our work was to not be in the hospital in Leigh, Lancashire, when our daughter Christa was born. I was coming in from meetings overseas and did not quite make the mega event. Since today, as I write, it is Christa's birthday, I dedicate this chapter to her.

We named her after Christa Fisher from what was then East Germany. Christa had come to Jesus in the early days of our ministry in Madrid, where we lived when we first came to Europe in the fall of 1960. That was right before Ben, our first son, was born.



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This story begins even before that, during the summer of 1957, when three of us friends were planning a trip to preach the gospel and distribute literature in Mexico. We didn't go until mid-July since Dale Rhoton was studying at Wheaton Summer School, so Walter Borchard, who had been my college roommate at Maryville, and I were selling Christian books door to door near my home in northeast New Jersey. I had already been selling fire extinguishers in that area for a number of years and that business had been successful. I would light a fire in a pan in front of someone's house and then, while they watched in amazement, put it out with this little Presto Fire Extinguisher. I soon recruited others to sell them and made a handsome profit. My boss was a man from Manhattan and, at sixteen, I felt quite special going to meet with him there. He was so happy about my sales volume that he made me the exclusive agent for Bergen County and I officially registered my company as Bergen County Sales Co. All was going well until Jesus came into my life and led me into the "Eternal Fire Extinguisher" business! So, while Dale was at Wheaton Summer School, Walter and I were selling Christian books in New Jersey to earn money for our trip.

I especially remember one particular lady in North Haledon. After buying a lot of books, which made me happy, she told me something I've never forgotten. I think

she could tell I was big on zeal but weak on wisdom, so she challenged me to read the “wisdom” book of Proverbs in the Old Testament. “A proverb a day will keep the devil away,” she said. Then she opened her Bible to Proverbs and showed me how there were thirty-one chapters, one for every day in the month, and said I should read a chapter every day. I’d been slowly making my way through the Old Testament and hadn’t gotten to Proverbs yet, but that night I did what she said, and I’ve been in Proverbs ever since. Little did I know what God had in store for me, and how much the wisdom and exhortations of this book would help me in my forty-six-year pilgrimage as leader of Operation Mobilization.

What are some of the themes that hit me the hardest? Here are four highlights.

**Victory over lust.** There are hundreds of Bible verses about sex, and some of them seem pretty wild and out of the box! For example:

*May your fountain be blessed,  
and may you rejoice in the wife of your youth.  
A loving doe, a graceful deer—  
may her breasts satisfy you always,  
may you ever be intoxicated with her love.*

Proverbs 5:18–19

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That's good advice! And to make sure it sinks in, consider the consequences of not taking it to heart:

*All at once he followed her [the adulteress]  
like an ox going to the slaughter,  
like a deer stepping into a noose . . .  
Many are the victims she has brought down;  
her slain are a mighty throng.  
Her house is a highway to the grave,  
leading down to the chambers of death.*  
Proverbs 7:22, 26–27

As a young Christian, so hungry for God and so radically committed to Jesus and His Word, I had no idea I would battle with this all my life. Again and again I would read Proverbs 5, 6, and 7, and that gave me the strength to defeat this ongoing challenge.

The chapter about this in my book *Drops from a Leaking Tap*, was one of the hardest things I had ever written when it first came out as a magazine article. Thankfully, many people were helped by it, which led us to become one of the major distributors of books on this subject in many languages around the world.

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**Sins of the tongue** show up again and again in Proverbs.  
Just try these verses on for size!

*A gentle answer turns away wrath,  
but a harsh word stirs up anger.  
The tongue of the wise adorns knowledge,  
but the mouth of the fool gushes folly.  
The eyes of the LORD are everywhere,  
keeping watch on the wicked and the good.  
The soothing tongue is a tree of life,  
but a perverse tongue crushes the spirit.*

Proverbs 15:1-4

*Even fools are thought wise if they keep silent,  
and discerning if they hold their tongues.*

Proverbs 17:28

*Those who guard their mouths and their tongues  
keep themselves from calamity.*

Proverbs 21:23

I discovered the hard way how easy it is to hurt people with unkind words. In my case, the one I hurt the most was my own wife! It was through reading books like *Calvary*

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*Road* by Roy Hession, and *Humility* by Andrew Murray, that I learned how to humble myself, repent, and apologize. Thankfully, due to God’s work of grace in my life, the “revolution of love” that I’ve written about has been a growing reality in me.

Pride is the thing that keeps us from realizing how our words affect other people, so I have declared war on all forms of pride. Verses like Galatians 2:20 have become part of my spiritual DNA, and the lack of emphasis today on this truth in many churches and among some leaders is one of the present-day weaknesses that concern me the most—and often leads to “messy” situations.

Billy Graham was a huge help to me with his powerful messages on the seven deadly sins. I got them in printed form to read and distribute. These messages hit me so hard I can tell you exactly when and where I read them: 8 Tasso Road, Fulham, London. It was February, 1962, and we lived there in a one-bedroom flat that Hoise Birks talks about in his autobiography, *A New Man*. We had just arrived in the UK and the name Operation Mobilization was being used for the very first time.

**Laziness.** I remember at an OM conference in India back around 1967 that I asked people to share their biggest struggle. To my surprise, many of them said laziness. I think this

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became even a bigger problem there because of the extreme heat, and I experienced some of it myself. My early reading of Proverbs back in New Jersey had warned me about lack of discipline and laziness in its many forms.

*Diligent hands will rule,  
but laziness ends in forced labor.  
The lazy do not roast any game,  
but the diligent feed on the riches of the hunt.*

Proverbs 12:24, 27

*One who is slack in his work  
is brother to one who destroys.*

Proverbs 18:9

*Laziness brings on deep sleep,  
and the shiftless go hungry.  
A sluggard buries his hand in the dish;  
he will not even bring it back to his mouth!*

Proverbs 19:15, 24

*The sluggard says, "There's a lion outside!  
I'll be killed in the public square!"  
Do you see someone skilled in their work?*

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*They will serve before kings;  
they will not serve before officials of low rank.*

Proverbs 22:13, 29

I was blessed in my childhood to have a very hard-working father who taught me well in that biblical ethic, so I had to learn the hard way how to be patient with those who did not have that same work ethic. Sadly, my strong emphasis on work and discipline would lead some people into pretension. People would behave one way when no one was watching, but quite differently when someone from the team was watching. Later they would feel condemned, which could lead to all kinds of spiritual and emotional confusion. This is why, again and again, our whole movement—and especially my own life—was rescued by “radical grace.”

**Anger.** I started getting into fights at a young age, once even with a girl who sort of beat me up. I remember forming a little gang on my street in Wyckoff, New Jersey, when I must have been around twelve. We fought with acorns that fell off the trees. Albert led the other gang and we were enemies. One day I wrote the most popular swear words of our day with black paint on the side of his big white house. Shirley, the girl across the street, must have seen me and told my dad. He really did not appreciate this early outbreak of art and I

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had to go and paint over it. It seems funny in retrospect, but the truth is that anger could have destroyed my life.

I remember visiting a man in prison who had killed another man. He went to his girlfriend's house by surprise and found another man with her. In a burst of anger he killed him on the spot. When I met him he had found forgiveness in Jesus and was pressing on in prison sharing his faith.

Though I've had a high level of victory in this important area, I've also had my failures, which to this day I remember well. Impatience, which often accompanies anger, has been one of my weaknesses. But I have never given up the fight, and when I fail, I turn to the reality of these verses from 1 John:

*If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word is not in us.*

1 John 1:8–10

*My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have an advocate with the Father—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is the*



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*atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.*

1 John 2:1–2

I feel so strongly about this that I urge people to never marry someone who does not have victory over anger. If the person has had major anger problems in the past there is a high chance that after marriage it will flare up again and there will be physical violence. Domestic violence, even among those who claim to follow the Lord, is one of the sins the church has been very gifted at covering up—especially if it’s a pastor, elder, or worship leader. If you are failing in this area you need to get help. Just reading Proverbs will not be enough. You need help—God’s help—which will always include repentance and walking in the light.

*This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all. If we claim to have fellowship with him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live out the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.*

1 John 1:5–7

## Fire Extinguishers, Books, and Proverbs

There are so many vital subjects in the book of Proverbs and I can't address them all here. My main reason for mentioning these few is to get you reading it regularly and dealing by faith with every issue the Lord speaks to you about. I also encourage you to read and practice 2 Timothy 2:2 by sharing what you have learned with others, who can then pass it on to others.

*And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable people who will also be qualified to teach others.*

2 Timothy 2:2