



PROMOTIONAL MESSAGING

Promotions and Invitations for Alpha

Alpha Best Practices (1)

“When creative directors at an advertising agency plan a strategy to promote a client, they research the client’s past efforts, how the client wants to be portrayed, what the client wants to say, and how the audience already perceives the before they do anything else. If preaching is about the salvation of both the speaker and the audience, a preacher should make an even more diligent effort to come to know God, the message God wants His people to hear, and how people already perceive God, than the advertising agency does for a soap company.”

C. Colt Anderson, *Christian Eloquence: Contemporary Doctrinal Preaching*



MESSAGING

What applies to the preacher with regard to preaching applies to the parish with regard to promoting events, especially Alpha. Messaging presupposes some understanding of what message God wants His people to hear and how people already perceive God. This, in part, is how I answer questions from parish leaders about what to say when promoting Alpha or inviting people to attend the Alpha course.

To Mr. Anderson’s point, what message does God want his people to hear? Great examples of divine messaging are in both the Old and New Testament. Notice how His Word is adapted to the human needs and circumstances of His people. For starters, the Psalms, the Proverbs and the Gospel stories appeal to a wide range of human emotions, experiences and questions. The bible, as the greatest selling book in history, has endured for hundreds of years for this very reason. God’s Word is always relevant precisely because it appeals to the day-to-day drama of life.

As for how people perceive God, the promotion of Alpha, or any discipleship opportunity for that matter, should take into consideration the kind of questions people are asking *today*. One question that certainly influences people’s priorities is: “What’s in it for me?” Like it or not, this is the question many people are asking themselves before committing to any event or activity.

Answering this question before it is asked will help us promote Alpha and invite people to the Alpha course. This question will also inspire us to step outside of ourselves and take stock on how to cross the divide between parish life and secular society. A book on evangelization once noted that, on average, the longer one is an active member of a parish or a disciple of Jesus Christ, the less contact he or she has with non-practicing Christians. With this, the ability to relate to and understand the people that need to be evangelized diminishes over time. Before we know it, that divide between “us” and “them” widens considerably with the sad consequence of us not knowing how to cross it.

PROMOTIONS

As far as promoting Alpha or inviting people to the Alpha course, it is important to remember that one standard set of talking points or any kind of script would betray an effective messaging strategy. As indicated, messaging has to be adapted to the parish doing the promoting and its target audience. However, there are a few things to consider before carrying this out.

First, a question worth asking is this: What are common experiences or awakenings that lead people to a relationship with Jesus? Dave and Jon Ferguson attempted to answer this question in their book, *Finding Your Way Back to God*. In their book, they have identified five common awakenings: (1) Longing: “There’s got to be more”, (2) Regret: “I wish I could start over”, (3) Help: “I can’t do this on my own”, (4) Love: “God loves me deeply after all”, and (5) Life: “Now, this is living.”

All of these awakenings have served as common pathways to initial and ongoing conversion. And to be sure, these five awakenings are, in some way, related to what the *General Directory for Catechesis* calls “essential moments” in the process of evangelization. By using our God-given creativity, these essential moments or experiences can provide the content for promoting discipleship opportunities such as Alpha.

Recently, I drove by a digital sign for a Christian mega-church that read: “Life crisis? We can help!” Indeed, overcoming a crisis, coping with stress or resolving conflict can be opportunities to meet Jesus Christ. For many seekers, this eventually leads to living a joy-filled and productive life in which they are inspired to share with others, “Now, this is living!”

To be sure, encountering Christ in everyday life serves as a springboard to an active participation in the Mass and in the sacraments. Too often, however, we tend to message promotions and invitations about the latter. But the truth is that an effective messaging strategy enjoys a wide appeal when it addresses the drama of everyday life. And the good news is that with the help of disciples like you and I, people can discover Jesus in *that* drama and then be accompanied into a fuller communion with the Church.

INVITATIONS

The second thing to consider is with regard to personal invitations (but it can also apply to parish-wide promotions). When the Holy Spirit opens the door in our conversations with people (that is, when it feels natural and non-eruptive), tell them about the “before and after” of your conversion or how Jesus

Christ has impacted your life. For instance, if a non-practicing Catholic were to ask you, “As far as being a follower of Christ is concerned, what’s in it for me? Why should I care? Why should I take time out of my busy day to attend your parish programs?” What would you say? Especially to someone who is clearly indifferent about the Church? To rattle off talking points about creed, sacraments or parish programs at this juncture is likely to go over their heads.

Yet, here is a helpful illustration in a book called, *Just Walk Across the Room* by Bill Hybels on how Jesus can personally make a difference in someone’s life. Such a difference of the *before and after* can be good content with invitations and promotions.

“Perhaps you know someone can testify to this: ‘Before I met Christ, I had a plaguing sense of aloneness. I grew up in a broken and dysfunctional family. My days were spent alone, my nights isolated. But then I met Christ! He actually adopted me into his family, and now I know what it means to be wanted, to be cared for, to be loved.’

Hybels continues: “It is as simple as this, friends. Who were you before, and who are you now, as result of Christ’s passionate intervention in your journey?

‘I was striving....but now I’m grateful.’

‘I was self-destructive...but now I’m healthy.’

‘Guilty...but now liberated.’

‘Fear-stricken...but now confident.’

‘Despairing....but now hopeful!’”

Can anyone in your parish testify to this kind of divine intervention? Can we use the wide-range of human emotions, experiences and questions of daily life with our parish-wide Alpha promotions and personal invitations? Yes we can! In fact, I would say that such creative messaging by a parish is more relevant to people’s lives than anything an advertising agency does for a soap company! We just have to believe it!

The next sequence in *Alpha Best Practices (2)* will address some proven methods of promoting Alpha in a parish.

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