

Profile of a "Plain Talk" Teacher

by James Hefley

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A favorite story among toastmasters concerns the pompous, verbose preacher invited to speak at the annual banquet of a civic club. While he was being introduced, his wife slipped him a folded note. He glanced at the initials K.I.S.S. and smiled back. But her whisper changed the smile to a frown as she reminded, "It means 'Keep It Simple, Stupid.' "

Dr. Manford George Gutzke needs no such prompting. He has the capacity to be simple without being simplistic and profound without becoming lost in a thicket of words. Like the old time Methodist fire-eater Sam Jones, Gutzke "puts the fodder down where the common folks can reach it." The common folks, whom Lincoln said the Lord must have loved because He made so many of them, must appreciate this uncommon Bible teacher. He is heard on 140 radio stations and draws capacity crowds at Bible conferences. And he is read by thousands who have bought multiple printings of his "Plain Talk" commentaries and devotional Bible studies published by Zondervan, Baker, Nelson, and Regal.

Dr. G., as some radio listeners who can't spell his name address him, is as warm in person as his radio and platform personality suggests. If you've heard only his clear, bell-ringing voice, you're surprised that he's seventy-ish. ("I took voice training under Paul Jackson, a former Shakespearian actor, in seminary," he explains.) His round face under thick, dark eyebrows ripples easily into a smile. With an apron he could be your friendly neighborhood ethnic butcher, with a beard and larger stomach a jolly Santa Claus. It's easy to picture grandchildren climbing on his knees, which they do (he has 11 plus one great-grandchild), and begging for a story. Because he's so easy to talk with, you tend to forget that he holds a Ph.D. from Columbia University and taught in seminary for 27 years. Then when you have time to reflect, you realize the depth of what he has told you.

"I try to be just a man of the street," Dr. Gutzke says plainly. "I try never to leave a trail of terms and phrases that you can identify me by. One of the difficulties in religious communication is that people wait for certain catch patterns. If you have them you are orthodox and if you don't you aren't. Hearing these, the traditional evangelical tends to fall asleep for the rest of your talk." Dr. Gutzke's passion for plain talk stems from his belief that "there are people up and down this whole country who do not understand the Gospel. That was the way it was with me," he recalls. "For years I searched before someone showed me the way."

Dr. Gutzke's ancestors emigrated to Canada from an area called Utzk in old Poland. "They had no family name," he notes. "A child was known by his father. When East Prussia took over Utzk the occupation forces simply put a consonant in front of the name so there were families named Utzk, Butzk, Dutzk, Gutzk, and so on. When we came to Canada an "e" was added and we were Gutzke."

The Gutzkes had a farm in the cold province of Manitoba. Before Manford had his fourth birthday, his mother became critically ill. "She called me into her room. Unlike the people outside, she was not crying. She looked into my face and smiled. 'Always be a good boy and do what your father tells you,' she said. 'And come and be with me where I am going.' That was all. I thought no more of it at the time. But years later this was used in my life, almost like a beacon."

His father remarried when he was six to a moral woman who "tried to do everything right. There was no profanity or loose speech in our home. No labor was done on the Sabbath. No boisterous games. I had the feeling that God was our Creator and our Judge. The idea that God would forgive and be gracious to

me never occurred to me in my childhood."

The Gutzkes attended the local Presbyterian church, though they were not members. "Church," Dr. Gutzke remembers, "meant that you dressed up in your best and acted your best. The hymns were long and sung slow. The Scripture reading was usually unintelligible to me. I didn't understand much that was sung or read and I didn't think anybody else did either. There was a long prayer and sermons. But nothing ever happened. As a boy I never saw anyone go forward and say, 'I have accepted Jesus Christ.' That church never reached me.

"In the summer only two men came to Sunday school, the superintendent who happened to be a local politician and the treasurer. Then a new neighbor moved into the community and surprised everybody by going the first Sunday. We boys noticed that Mr. Caruthers carried a Bible. We also heard that he said grace at the table. We didn't know of any man who ever did that. We gathered in the barn before Sunday School started and discussed this strange man. We concluded that he had a genius for religion just as some people have a talent for music or poetry.

"The church had an annual offering for foreign missions. Usually it was only three or four dollars. The first Sunday Caruthers was there the offering was more than \$40.00. That baffled us. Why would a man give the price of two cows to send the Christian message to a foreign country?"

By this time Manford was in high school. The principal was admired by all the boys and highly moral, but not a Christian. Manford noticed that he went only occasionally to church. Manford decided that religion was related to respectability and decency, so he continued to attend. But Mr. Caruthers still puzzled him.

An unusually bright student, Manford studied the evolutionary theory, and rejected it for "having no real evidence." But he saw the Bible as only "one of the religious books of the world, a literary deposit out of the history of the times."

During his junior year he was haunted by acute pangs of loneliness. "I felt I was a trouble to my folks. I couldn't believe my teachers really cared. I thought of my mother and decided she would care about me. Would I ever be with her again? That was when I realized I had no confidence about heaven. I stood under the stars and wished and wished that God and heaven were real."

He aspired to be a lawyer, but World War I interrupted his schooling. Serving in the Canadian army, he won Highest Honors at the Army's Gymnastic Staff Training School where he was also heavyweight boxing champion. When the war ended he enrolled in college and prepared to be a school teacher. Still wondering about spiritual things, he began reading the Bible and went back to church. After hearing a sermon on heaven – his first – he and two other students sought out the minister. "You said if anybody didn't know how to get to heaven you would tell them," Manford reminded him.

The preacher began by asking Manford questions. Did he smoke, gamble, drink, use profanity? Did he read the Bible, know the Lord's prayer, understand the Ten Commandments? When Manford answered everything in the affirmative, the man assured, "You don't have anything to worry about. Keep right on this road and you'll get there." But when they came away, Manford groaned to his friends, "He doesn't know either."

Manford took up school teaching as a profession. He was still searching when he met an unusual country postmaster. After they got acquainted, the postmaster asked, "Are you a Christian?" – a question the young teacher had never been asked before. Manford thought he might be because he wasn't a pagan. After many discussions and much reading of the Bible, Manford became convinced that Christianity was real. "One night while I was walking on a country road, I just looked up into the heavens and spoke to God. 'I believe now that You are there, and I believe that Jesus Christ is Your Son

and that He died for me,' I said. 'I know I need Your salvation. Help me.' And suddenly I was able to believe."

Manford stopped teaching and went to work for a lawyer in Winnipeg, planning to enter law school the next term. Then he sensed a call to full-time Christian work and applied to the Bible Institute of Los Angeles for Bible training. The call also moved him to keep the name "Gutzke," instead of changing it to Goodman as he had planned, because "I didn't want anyone to ever think me a hypocrite."

Before entering BIOLA he worked briefly for the British and Foreign Bible Society. While collecting money, he met a young teacher named Sara Bernstein, the daughter of a Hebrew Christian from Russia. He asked to see her again, not for a second donation, but to get better acquainted. They were subsequently married.

At BIOLA Manford studied under Dr. R.A. Torrey and later at Dallas Theological Seminary under Dr. H. A. Ironside and Dr. Lewis Sperry Chafer.

His memories of these legendary teachers are still sharp. "Once I heard a student ask Dr. Torrey if he believed in the 'second blessing.' He grinned behind his Van Dyke beard and said, 'Yes! And in the 42nd!' When a certain girl was caught stealing, Dr. Torrey announced to our student body that she had confessed and been forgiven. He added, "Any student heard referring to this again will be dismissed from school." He was that gracious.

Manford transferred to Southern Methodist University where he earned a Master of Arts degree. Then after pastoring a Presbyterian Church in Dallas for more than eight years, he was named Professor of Bible and Religious Education at Austin College, in Sherman, Texas.

After three years of college teaching, he was invited in 1939 to join the faculty of Columbia Theological Seminary in Decatur, Georgia. Here he taught hundreds of Presbyterian ministerial students during the next 27 years. Four of his now better known students are Leighton Ford, Larry Love, James Kennedy, and Ben Haden.

While teaching at the seminary he studied for a Ph.D. in education at Columbia University. "I took my doctorate in a secular field because I wanted to communicate with the man in the world," Dr. Gutzke declares. "I studied John Dewey, the father of so-called 'progressive' education, although I didn't believe as he did. I wrote my thesis on his conception of intelligence."

Dr. Gutzke chuckles over his days at Columbia University. "One of the professors became very interested in me because he knew I was a Christian and believed the Bible. One day he admitted that he had trouble conceiving of God as a person. I asked him to define a person and he said, 'No informed psychologist has the language for that.' I said, 'You think I'm a person, don't you?' He nodded. 'Well, if you can't describe a person whom you can see, how can you describe God whom you have never seen?' That got him down to bedrock thinking and soon he began thinking of God as a person. You don't reach people with the Gospel on a sophisticated level. You must bring them down to the grass roots level."

While at Columbia Seminary Dr. Gutzke taught for 17 years a Monday night Bible class in Atlanta's North Avenue Presbyterian Church. The class attracted people from 200 local congregations in the Atlanta area.

A group asked to tape his messages for a local radio station. Another station asked for the tapes, then another. In time a movement began to put his Bible teaching on the air. Beginning with 40 stations, the program is now heard in six 15-minute segments each week day and for 30 minutes on Sunday over the current network of 140 stations.

Ben Haden, one of Dr. Gutzke's students, had been a newspaper publisher (now pastor of First Presbyterian Church, Chattanooga, and also an author). He suggested to Dr. Gutzke, "Write as you talk .

. . If you sit down to write, your copy will be thick and heavy and no one will want to read it. You're a professional at talking; so have it taken down, then edited for publication."

Dr. Gutzke took his student's advice. His first book *Plain Talk About Christian Words* is now in its 11th printing. His other books are also popular because of his gift to make biblical truth understandable to the everyday reader.

The way he defines the philosophers who heard Paul on Mars Hill amply illustrates his "Plain Talk":

The Epicureans and the Stoics represented two schools of thought among the Greeks. The Epicureans had the idea that the greatest good is what enjoyment you get out of life. "Enjoy yourself now; you will be a long time dead," was their philosophy. The Stoics said you ought to be good for goodness' sake. You ought to be good because it is good to be good. (Plain Talk on Acts, Zondervan, p. 155).

Some theologians have written volumes on these schools of philosophy without saying much more.

But while Gutzke's messages sparkle with clarity, the spelling of his name remains a enigma for many radio listeners. His wife has tabulated more than 800 varieties in spelling with almost every consonant of the alphabet being used as the first letter. He has even been addressed as "Dr. Whiskey."

"When we began the program we recognized this problem. We thought of Dr. George, Dr. Manford, or even Dr. G. Finally, Don Munson, who was then my manager said, 'Why don't we just go ahead and call you what you are, *Dr. Gutzke?*' Now we wouldn't change it for anything."

Two illustrious sons are just as proud of the name. Dr. Mark Gutzke holds a Ph.D. in Chemistry. After eight years in research, he resigned and came to Columbia Seminary as a student during his father's last three years of academic teaching. He is now a pastor. John Gutzke is an electronics engineer who supervised the wiring of Lockheed's giant super-sonic jet before he was 35 years old.

Daughter Miriam, the widow of a minister, is the only woman member on the faculty of Earlham School of Religion in Indiana. She teaches pastoral counseling. Another daughter, Elizabeth, is married and living in South Carolina.

Dr. and Mrs. Gutzke's fifth and youngest child is in heaven. Dr. Gutzke has built a special message around this son's death called, "Lord . . . Teach Us to Pray." In this message he relates how God used the experience to help him reach a new plateau in prayer.

"Our's was the grief, but Peter's was the glory," he remembers. "To this day our hearts humbly praise God for leading us in that dark hour of grieving sorrow away from the natural desires of our human hearts into the quiet rest of the perfect will of God. In a deeper way than ever before we were able to pray, 'Thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven.' "

This is Dr. Manford George Gutzke, a doubter by nature, a believer by redemption, a much-loved Bible teacher by long study of the Scriptures and enrollment in the school of Christian experience. Not everyone can spell or pronounce his name correctly, but everyone – from illiterates to intellectuals – can understand his plain talk.