Friendship with Jesus

Dr. Michael Gleghorn draws on a work by Dr. Gail R. O'Day, "Jesus as Friend in the Gospel of John,"{1} to explore the perspective of Jesus Christ as a Friend.

What a Friend We Have in Jesus{2}

In his book, *The Problem of Pain*, C. S. Lewis offers four analogies of God's love for humanity.{3} These include the love of an artist for a great work of art, the love of a human being for an animal, the love of a father for his son, and the love of a man for a woman. Interestingly, he does not consider the analogy of friendship, or love between friends. In one sense it's surprising, for Lewis would later write quite perceptively about friendship in his book, *The Four Loves.*



Of course, at this time in his career, Lewis may not have even thought about the love of friendship in the context of discussing analogies of God's love for humanity. After all, on the surface, the Bible appears to say little about friendship between God and human beings. But saying little is not the same as saying nothing, and the Bible does speak about the possibility of enjoying friendship with God. In fact, the Gospel of John offers a great illustration of this in the life and teaching of Jesus, whom Christians regard as God the Son incarnate. John presents Jesus as a true friend, one who is willing to speak the truth to those He loves and to lay down His life for their benefit.

Consider Jesus' words to his disciples in John 15: "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. No longer do I call you servants, for the

servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you" (vv. 12-15).

In this brief passage, Jesus surfaces several important elements of friendship which would have been readily recognized by people in the ancient world. We'll carefully consider each of these elements in this article. For now, however, the key point to notice is that Jesus explicitly refers to His disciples as "friends." Moreover, He also holds out to them the possibility of deepening their friendship with both Him, and one another.

In what follows, we'll unpack many of these ideas further. First, however, we must get a better understanding of how friendship was viewed in the ancient world.

Friendship in the Ancient World

Of course, John's discussion of friendship in his gospel does not occur in a cultural or historical vacuum. Indeed, he seems to have been aware of other such discussions and even enters into a dialogue (of sorts) with some of them. So how was friendship understood in the ancient world?

The most important discussion of friendship in antiquity is probably that found in Aristotle's *Ethics.* As one philosopher observes, "Aristotle's treatise on friendship is comprehensive and confident, as well as undeniably profound."{4} Aristotle views friendship as something like the glue of a community, binding people together in relations of benevolence and love. Such relations are indispensable for the community's health and well-being.{5}

Aristotle describes friendship as "*reciprocated* goodwill" and claims that the highest form of friendship occurs between "good people similar in virtue." The primary virtue of real friends is "loving" one another. And such love is expressed in

practical actions, for the virtuous person "labours for his friends" and is even willing to "die for them" if necessary.

Finally, the ancients also viewed "frank speech" and "openness" as essential elements of friendship. According to Plutarch, "Frankness of speech . . . is the language of friendship . . . and . . . lack of frankness is unfriendly and ignoble."{6} The language of friendship thus involves something like "speaking the truth in love" (Ephesians 4:15). Friendship should allow, and even encourage, frank speech. And yet, such speech should always be characterized by love and a genuine desire for the friend's best interest.

Putting this all together, we can see how Jesus' remarks about friendship correlate with the ancient ideals expressed in the writings of men like Aristotle and Plutarch. Just as Aristotle viewed friendship as the glue of a community, so also Jesus seems to envision the formation of a community of friends, who are bound together in love by their shared allegiance to Him. As biblical scholar Dr. Gail O'Day observes, "The language of friendship provided language for talking about the construction of a community of like-minded people informed by a particular set of teachings."{7}

Below, we'll consider how Jesus both models and encourages the ancient ideals of friendship in His life and teaching.

The Language of Friendship

One of the ways in which John shows Jesus demonstrating friendship is through his frank and honest speech. We've seen that in the ancient world, open and honest speech was regarded as one of the hallmarks of friendship. And there are several occasions in which such speech is attributed to Jesus in the Gospel of John (e.g., 7:26; 10:24-30; 11:14; 16:25-33; 18:19-20).{8}

Of course, this doesn't mean that everything Jesus had to say

was easy to understand. It wasn't, and even his disciples often misunderstood Him. Nor does it mean that Jesus never taught truths about God by using parables or figurative language. Indeed, He often did. What it does mean, however, is that throughout his Gospel, John repeatedly portrays Jesus as speaking and teaching the truth about God openly and honestly to all who care to listen.

For example, Jesus is described as "speaking openly" while teaching the people in the temple at the Feast of Booths (John 7:14, 26). Moreover, after His arrest, when Jesus is being questioned by the High Priest, He frankly declares to those present, "I have spoken openly to the world. I have always taught in synagogues and in the temple, where all Jews come together. I have said nothing in secret" (John 18:20). Dr. Gail O'Day observes that Jesus here claims that His entire public ministry has "been characterized by freedom of speech throughout its duration." She writes, "Jesus has not held anything back in His self-revelation but has spoken with the freedom that marks a true friend."{9}

Finally, we must not forget what Jesus says to His disciples in John 15: "No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you" (v. 15). Here Jesus explicitly refers to His disciples as "friends," claiming that He has "made known" to them everything that He has heard from the Father. Not only does Jesus call His disciples "friends," He also speaks to them in the language of friendship, openly and honestly revealing to them the heart and mind of the Father.

Judged by the criterion of "frank and honest speech," Jesus thus reveals Hmself to be a true friend to His disciples. And as we'll see next, He is willing to do much more than this, for Jesus is willing to lay down His life for the benefit of others.

The Ultimate Demonstration of Friendship

In John 15 Jesus declares, “Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends” (v. 13). Earlier we saw that Aristotle, in his writings on friendship, maintained that the true friend, actuated by genuine goodness, would even be willing to “die” (if necessary) for the sake of a friend.{10} Of course, as any reader of the Gospels knows, Jesus soon does this very thing, thus demonstrating the greatest possible love according to the ancient ideals of friendship. As Dr. O’Day observes, “Jesus did what the philosophers only talked about—He lay down his life for His friends.”{11}

This event is foreshadowed by Jesus in His claim to be the Good Shepherd in John 10. “I am the good shepherd,” He says. “The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep” (v. 11). This claim is one of the seven “I Am” statements of Jesus in the Gospel of John, and it likely involves an implicit claim to deity, for as Edwin Blum has noted, “In the Old Testament, God is called the Shepherd of His people (Psalm 23:1; 80:1-2; Ecclesiastes 12:11; Isaiah 40:11; Jeremiah 31:10).”{12} One thinks of the way in which David begins Psalm 23: “The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want” (v. 1). The Lord Jesus, as the Good Shepherd of His people, is willing to lay down His life for their benefit (John 10:11).

But Jesus goes further than this, for as Paul tells us, Jesus not only gave His life for His “friends,” but even for His “enemies.” “For while we were still weak,” writes Paul, “at the right time Christ died for the ungodly” (Romans 5:6). “While we were still sinners” (Romans 5:8), and even “enemies,” “we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son” (Romans 5:10). If dying for one’s friends epitomizes the ancient ideal of friendship, dying for one’s enemies far transcends this ideal. It demonstrates the sacrificial love of God for all humanity. While we were spiritually dead, mired in

sin and rebellion (Ephesians 2:1-3), God “sent his Son to be the savior of the world” (1 John 4:14).

Aristotle referred to friendship as “reciprocated goodwill.” Jesus demonstrated the greatest possible love and “goodwill” of God by giving His life for the sins of the world (John 1:29). He commands His disciples to reciprocate His goodwill by loving “one another” as He has loved us (John 15:12, 14). By following His command, a community of friends is formed, bound together in love for one another and a shared commitment to Jesus.

A Community of Friends

Jesus calls His disciples “friends” and commands them to “love one another” as He has loved them (John 15:12). Jesus wants His followers to regard themselves not only as *His* friends, but as friends of one another as well. He intends for them to be a community of friends, bound together in their love for one another because of their shared devotion to Him. The sort of love to which Jesus calls them is a costly love, for He desires that His people’s love for one another be an imitation of the love that He has already demonstrated toward them. And what sort of love is this? It’s the kind of love that is willing to give one’s life for the benefit of others, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends (John 15:13).

Now this, I think we can all agree, is a very high calling. Indeed, if we’re honest, I think that we must all admit that, humanly speaking, it is frankly impossible. If some degree of discomfort does not grip our hearts in considering this commandment, then we probably aren’t considering it in all due seriousness. Very few of us will probably ever reach the level of truly loving other believers just as Jesus has loved us, and if any of us do reach it, we probably won’t be able to consistently maintain such love in our daily practice. But Jesus commands us to do it, and we must at least begin trying

to do so. But how?

Dr. Gail O'Day, I think, strikes the right tone when she comments: "The disciples begin with the explicit appellation, 'friend,' and the challenge for them is to enact and embody friendship as Jesus has done. The disciples know how Jesus has been a friend, and they are called to see what kind of friends they can become. Jesus' friendship is the model of friendship for the disciples, and it makes any subsequent acts of friendship by them possible because the disciples themselves are already the recipients of Jesus' acts of friendship."{13}

We must remember that Jesus is our friend, that He loves us and provides all that we need to live a holy and God-honoring life. Indeed, He has sent the Holy Spirit to indwell and empower His people for just this purpose. As we trust in Jesus, giving ourselves to Him (and one another) in genuine love and friendship, we will find that we are increasingly obeying His commands and bearing fruit that brings Him glory. So let's commit ourselves to friendship with Jesus, and to those who compose His body, the church (1 Corinthians 12:27; Ephesians 5:23; Colossians 1:24).

Notes

1. Much of the content of this article is indebted to the prior work of Gail R. O'Day, "Jesus as Friend in the Gospel of John," *Interpretation*, 58(2):144-157.
2. The title for this day is indebted to the song, "What a Friend We Have in Jesus." The words to this song were originally penned by Joseph Scriven in the 19th century; they were set to music by Charles Converse in 1868. For a brief history of Scriven and the hymn, please see Terry, L. (2004, July-August). Joseph Scriven's: "What a Friend We Have in Jesus": What a friend we have in Jesus, all our sins and griefs to bear! What a privilege to carry everything to God in prayer! *Today's Christian*, 42(4), 16.
3. C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York, NY: Macmillan,

1962), 42-48.
4. Michael Pakaluk (Ed.), *Other Selves: Philosophers on Friendship* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1991), 28.
5. I am drawing from Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Terence Irwin (Hackett Publishing, 1985), 1155a23-27.
6. Plutarch, *How to Tell a Flatterer from a Friend*, 61; cited in Gail O'Day, "Jesus as Friend in the Gospel of John," *Interpretation* 58(2):147.
7. O'Day, 147.
8. See the discussion in O'Day, 152-57.
9. O'Day, 156.
10. See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Terence Irwin (Hackett Publishing, 1985).
11. O'Day, 150.
12. Edwin A. Blum, "John," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament Edition*, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Victor Books, 1989), 310.
13. O'Day, 152.

©2023 Probe Ministries

Satan Loses—Every Single Time

Someone commented on one of our articles about Satan. They said that many people, both believers and non-believers, feel that Satan holds the upper hand in life over Christ. Many reasons exist that could lead one to believe the devil has the world in his hands. Nothing could be further from the truth. What humanity witnesses on a day-to-day basis as Satan winning, I'll provide some additional proclamations that would challenge the notion. I wouldn't say he's winning by any means. He's not even losing.

In fact, Satan lost. When? First, he lost when he rebelled

against the Living God. That's the first "L." The second huge loss took place through Jesus Christ, when He died on the cross at Calvary. Jesus snatched the keys of death and Hades from Satan. With that, people now have a way to access God's peace and intimacy through the risen Savior. Then why does it seem like the devil has the upper hand in life? It *seems* that way because (1) he knows he has little time left (Revelation 12:12) in influencing this side of eternity, and (2) the devil remains consistent on his path of destruction (John 10:10; Job 1:7, 2:2).

Some may ask, "Why doesn't God do something about what's happening in the world?" He did. First, let's remember that Jesus Christ reigns as Lord over all things. Second, after His death and resurrection, Jesus sent the world His Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit, or God the Spirit, the third Person of the Triune Godhead, holds a distinct function on earth. So today, Jesus lives *among* us through the Holy Spirit, but only through faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior does His Spirit live *in* us. The Living God sometimes chooses to work *through* people, sometimes *alongside* people, and other times outside of the influence of people.

For example, a Christian, having the Holy Spirit living *in* them, can demonstrate God's love and forgive the same way Jesus did. The Lord can then empower or work *upon* this same Christian (because teaching and preaching are spiritual gifts) to preach a sermon on love and forgiveness. The Holy Spirit, through the Christian, then *convinces* listeners (by working *upon* the heart) to come to faith in Christ by allowing Him *in* their hearts to believe. Yet, the Lord, in His omnipotence, works self-sufficiently to wake the Christian and the listeners up, who depend on God to see the new day. Only then can the Christian love and forgive like Jesus, preach the Gospel, and the listeners hear the message to consider eternal life.

With that said, God provided enough to the world to ensure the

world looks the way it should, despite the existence of Satan and His influence in the world. The Lord God gave us Himself. In the book of Genesis, the Lord told Cain to do and live right, while exposing a tactic of sin. God told Cain that sin "crouches" at his door (Genesis 4:7). Sin doesn't display itself as a loud and formidable opponent. Comparable to 1 Peter 5:8, sin, like Satan, takes a clandestine approach to trap and devour the lives of people. It desired to control Cain's life, but God commissioned Cain to master and control sin's advances. The Bible also tells us to resist and flee from sin (1 Corinthians 10:13, 2 Timothy 2:22, James 4:7). Today, sin holds an attractive appeal to the eye of those mastered by sin. Rejecting Jesus Christ and the Bible also holds significant popularity. Society encourages sin. The media aims to normalize it. People make excuses for it. The world embraces it.

Sin seems and *feels* good until it leaves you empty, left to address the dire consequences or irreparable damage, ones that can take years to repair if even possible. But that does not matter to those who have handed their calling from God to take dominion on the earth over to Satan. What Jesus rejected in the wilderness, the world has freely accepted. Those in submission to the flesh and its desires can only crave the wrath placed on the flesh after the Fall in Eden—to surely die and return to the dust (Genesis 2:17, Genesis 3:19).

So, when we see a world that seems like Satan is winning—he's not. The world continues and aims to find value in digging itself into the same hellhole that Satan and his demons put themselves in and will not get out of. Satan isn't winning. For every prince answers to a king—and Satan still answers to the King of kings. Yet, despite Jesus giving us everything we need to master sin and overcome Satan, the world, unfortunately, has decided that it's best that they, not Christ, surrender and bow to this defeated foe. Remember, Satan always broadcasts a counterfeit reality. Jesus Christ

has the victory now and forevermore.

©2025 Probe Ministries

Is Satan Equal to Jesus? 6 Biblical Truths You Need to Know

Is Satan equal to Jesus? Many people assume he is the opposite force of Christ—but Scripture tells a very different story. Terrence Harris reminds us why Satan and Jesus are not equally matched enemies.

My heart goes out to people who believe Satan is the equal opposite of Jesus Christ.

He is not.

Is Satan Equal to Jesus? Satan Is Created, Not Equal to God.

Many people still ask, "Is Satan equal to Jesus?" especially when influenced by media portrayals of Satan and demons having their way with people.

The Lord God created Lucifer along with all the angels in heaven.{1} Contrary to popular belief and culture, the artist holds deference over the artwork, just as the potter commands deference over the clay.

Satan Fell Through Pride, Not Power.

God changed Lucifer's title to Satan (which means *adversary*)

through his own pride, when he opposed God with the very gifts God gave him. Satan was so impressed with his own beauty and wisdom, I guess in his mind that made him a qualifying contender for God's throne.{2} But obviously (well, not as obvious to demons, apparently), Satan would never match the eternal power of the Almighty Living God.

Is Satan Equal to Jesus? Satan Is Already Defeated and Limited.

A third of the angels followed him in his rebellion, while two-thirds remained loyal to the Lord.{3}

The Lord stripped Lucifer of his glory, along with the other rebel angels, and threw them out of heaven down to the earth.{4} Satan caused many other angels to fall with him, who also chose to rebel against God. Since then, Satan and his demons have wreaked havoc on humanity, but that does not mean victory for our enemy.

The media often portrays Satan and demons (known as *fallen angels*) as having more authority and power than they truly possess. Movies tend to show a priest fidgeting with a cross and holy water, facing a demon-possessed person who boldly declares, "You have no authority over me." To that point, scripture actually gives a similar example of contending against the demonic realm in vain.

In Acts 19:13–16, the sons of Sceva tried to cast out demons "in the name of Jesus whom Paul preaches." This phrase alone communicates a lack of intimacy that these traveling Jewish exorcists had with Jesus Christ. The Bible says the demon replied, "Jesus, I know, and Paul, I know, but who are you?" Then the possessed man overpowered them, beating them and sending them away naked and wounded."

This brings us to the fourth critical point regarding the topic, "Is Satan Equal to Jesus?"

Knowing About Jesus ≠ Knowing Jesus.

Take note of this important reminder: It's not enough to just know *about* Jesus; Satan and his demons know *about* Jesus. Satan and demons can read the Bible, too. Satan tempted Jesus with a Bible verse in the wilderness, one that many Christians may not even know where to find. However, the true authority is in *knowing* Jesus *and* Jesus knowing you. *Knowing* Christ—instead of just knowing about Him or just knowing scripture—the intimacy with the Word of God—gives birth to godliness that pleases the heart of the Father.

Authority Comes From a Relationship with Christ.

Apart from Christ, humanity is "dead in trespasses and sins" and follows "the prince of the power of the air."{5} But for the blood-bought believer, the story is entirely different. Those who are filled with God's Spirit, who confess Jesus Christ as Lord, who believe He died for their sins, rose by the power of the Holy Spirit, and now sit at the right hand of the Father{6}—these are the ones who stand in the Lord's authority and victory.

Believers Share in Christ's Victory.

So the believer doesn't face the demonic realm alone. We stand in and by the authority of Christ Jesus and do not need to question whether Satan is equal to Jesus. Scripture assures us that "Greater is He Who is in you than he who is in the world."{7} Through Christ, we are more than conquerors.{8} Satan is the opposition, but never the equal opponent. The living God dwells within His people, and by His Spirit, they walk in victory and authority over the powers of darkness.

Did this article help you understand why Satan is not equal to Jesus? Please tell us your thoughts or questions in the

comments below.

For more Biblically inspired articles like “Is Satan Equal to Jesus?” please visit us at Probe.org.

Also visit these helpful links: www.youtube.com/watch?v=CamYtVpoTNk

Notes

1. Ezekiel 28:13-15
2. Isaiah 14:12-15
3. Revelation 12:4
4. Luke 10:18
5. Ephesians 2:1-2
6. Romans 8:11; Hebrews 1:3
7. 1 John 4:4
8. Romans 8:37

©2025 Probe Ministries

The Truth About Satan and Demons

Terrence Harris exposes the growing influence of Satan and the demons in the world today.

Today we live in a world that gravitates more and more toward demonic influences, particularly what we hear from the entertainment industry: the media, the music, and everything else in between. We see these ritual-like performances and symbolic messages by artists and entertainers showing up everywhere that give antichrist vibes,{1} encouraging society to live for themselves, worship themselves, and telling people they can “do and live however they want.”{2}

As Christians, we must ask: why would anyone choose to live in submission to demons and Satan himself?{3} From Scripture, we clearly see the habits and motives of these fallen and corrupted beings. We learn what they think of humanity,{4} what their possession of people looks like.{5} They oppress and seek to destroy anything that reflects God's image and the work of His hands.{6} The Bible also tells us where they come from,{7} their methods,{8} and that their end is coming—praise be to God.{9}

So why would anyone make allegiance to something that hates them? The demonic realm hates God, including His creation. They cannot destroy the Living God, so people are the next viable option.

Some may say, *"Well, I have a good life, I have everything I need, never prayed to anyone nor begged for anything. I did the work to get to where I am. That tells me that I never needed God."* And this is the position the devil wants you in.{10} Like Peter and Judas, Satan aims to expose and exploit our weaknesses{11}—to kill, steal, and destroy our lives{12}—at an opportune time.{13} God owns the breath in our bodies.{14} Our pride regarding life can blind us to this truth, taking God's grace, love, and patience for granted.{15} Satan banks on us declaring that we are "the masters of our fate and the captains of our own souls"{16}—minimizing Jesus to a non-essential.

And just like the devil and his angels, the messaging from the entertainment and media worlds tempts humanity to sin against God—right along with them.{17} How? Disguising sin and its consequences with things that entice the natural senses.{18} Some want fame and fortune, some desire success, power, and influence. Having only the natural desires of humanity in mind, they presume to offer people these in exchange for our God-given thoughts, talents, gifts, resources, etc. Everything the Living God gives us, Satan wants for his purposes,{19} while excluding the One who gave us life from our lives.{20}

My goal is not to glorify demons but to expose them.{21} It's time for Christians to pull back the veil and expose the truth: people who want to live in submission to Satan and his demons are literally asking for the same coming judgment of God—a judgment not originally meant for people.{22}

Every believer must understand these biblical truths concerning Satan and demons in order to navigate a world where demonic influence seems both rampant yet clandestine. But more importantly, I want to point to the greater reality: victory, true life, and authority belong only to those who place their faith in the Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.{23} Jesus holds all power and authority over every created being—forever and ever.{24}

Notes

1. 1 John 2:18
2. Judges 21:25
3. Ephesians 6:12
4. John 8:44
5. Mark 5:2-5
6. Genesis 1:27; 1 Peter 5:8
7. Isaiah 14:12-15; Revelation 12:7-9
8. 2 Corinthians 11:14; John 10:10
9. Revelation 20:10
10. Luke 12:16-21
11. Luke 22:3-4, 31
12. John 10:10
13. Luke 4:13
14. Acts 17:25
15. Romans 2:4
16. William Ernest Henley, *Invictus*
17. Genesis 3:1-6; Revelation 12:9
18. James 1:14-15; 1 John 2:16
19. Matthew 4:8-10
20. John 1:3-4
21. Ephesians 5:11

22. Matthew 25:41
23. Romans 8:37; 1 John 5:4-5
24. Philippians 2:9-11; Colossians 2:15

©2025 Probe Ministries

C.S. Lewis as Evangelist

Dr. Michael Gleghorn provides an insightful examination of how legendary Christian author C.S. Lewis used his writing to invite his readers to put their faith in Jesus Christ.

Lewis and Evangelism

"C. S. Lewis never invited unbelievers to come to Jesus. He was a very successful evangelist." So begins Michael Ward's essay "Escape to Wallaby Wood: Lewis's Depictions of Conversion." Ward follows up this provocative comment with others like it. For example, "Einstein failed his entrance exam to the Federal Polytechnic. He was a very successful physicist."{1} What is Ward wanting us to see here?



While he recognizes that his initial statement about Lewis needs some qualification, he's nonetheless put his finger on something very important about Lewis's evangelistic style. For while Lewis had a heart for evangelism, and desired to see men and women surrender their lives to Christ, he's not the sort of person one would typically think of when hearing the term "evangelist." One might readily describe Lewis as a Christian

apologist or imaginative storyteller, a literary scholar or skillful debater, but "evangelist" would probably not top the list. Nevertheless, it's important to remember that Lewis engaged in evangelistic activity in a variety of ways. While he was certainly not a "preaching" or "revivalistic" sort of evangelist, he was a "very successful evangelist" all the same.

Philip Ryken has helpfully described Lewis as a "teaching evangelist," a "praying evangelist," and a "discipling evangelist." Most important of all, however, he refers to Lewis as a "writing" or "literary evangelist." And this is surely correct, for Lewis's greatest "evangelistic impact" has been felt through his books and essays.{2}

Not long before his death, Lewis was interviewed by Sherwood Wirt of the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association. When asked if the aim of Christian writing (including his own writing) was to bring about an encounter between the reader and Jesus Christ, Lewis responded by saying, "That is not my language, yet it is the purpose I have in view."{3} Moreover, in his "Rejoinder to Dr. Pittenger," Lewis frankly confesses that most of his popular Christian books "are evangelistic" in character, and addressed to those outside the Christian faith.{4}

Of course, Lewis was not *merely* a "literary evangelist." While such terminology captures the fundamental way in which Lewis shared his faith, it was certainly not the only way. Moreover, evangelism was not something Lewis did simply because he enjoyed it. He felt an obligation, even a burden, to make Christ known to others.{5} And as we'll see later, these evangelistic concerns and motivations came with a very real cost to Lewis in terms of his professional career and friendships.{6}

The Significance of Lewis's Conversion

If there's one thing Lewis makes clear about his *own* conversion, first to theism and then to Christianity, it's that he felt himself to have been *pursued* by God and *drawn* into relationship with Him. While in one sense he saw his conversion as arising from a "wholly free choice" on his part, he also saw it as resulting from a kind of Divine necessity.{7} Lewis makes this clear in his spiritual autobiography, *Surprised by Joy.*

Consider the description of his conversion to Theism: "You must picture me alone in that room in Magdalen, night after night, feeling, whenever my mind lifted even for a second from my work, the steady, unrelenting approach of Him whom I so earnestly desired not to meet." Eventually, Lewis tells us, he "gave in, and admitted that God was God, and knelt and prayed," describing himself as "perhaps, that night, the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England."{8}

Interestingly, before this, Lewis had described God as offering him "a moment of wholly free choice"—an opportunity to either "open the door or keep it shut." He tells us that he chose to open it, but almost immediately relates that "it did not really seem possible to do the opposite." He goes on to speculate that perhaps "necessity" is not "the opposite of freedom."{9} All of this reveals how significant Lewis found God's involvement in his conversion to actually be.

His conversion to Christianity is similarly, if less dramatically, narrated. He writes of feeling "a resistance almost as strong as" his "previous resistance to Theism."{10} But having been through something similar already, the resistance was "shorter-lived." While being driven to Whipsnade Zoo, Lewis came to believe "that Jesus Christ is the Son of God." He once again speculates about whether this momentous event resulted from freedom or necessity and concludes that maybe the difference in such a case is

inconsequential.{11}

But why is this important for a discussion of Lewis and evangelism? Because it helps us understand how Lewis (on the one hand) could work tirelessly for the salvation of others, while also (on the other) recognizing that God was so powerfully involved in the conversion of a human soul that he (i.e., Lewis) need never worry that such weighty matters depended solely on him. He could thus be a relaxed evangelist, using his gifts to point others to Christ, while also recognizing that salvation is ultimately a work of God.

The Importance of "Translation" in Lewis's Evangelistic Work

So far, we've seen that the most important of Lewis's evangelism was through his writings. Indeed, the first book Lewis wrote, after becoming a Christian, was *The Pilgrim's Regress*. Published in 1933, the book bears the rather lengthy subtitle: "An Allegorical Apology for Christianity, Romanticism, and Reason." And as with so many of the books that followed Lewis's conversion, it was concerned to commend Christianity to others.

In 1938, Lewis published the first volume of his "Cosmic Trilogy," titled *Out of the Silent Planet*.{12} In this book, Lewis communicates elements of Christian theology within the context of a science-fiction adventure story. In 1940, he published *The Problem of Pain*, a work of Christian apologetics concerned to address the problem of evil and suffering. As I've noted elsewhere, this book "attracted the attention of James Welch, the Director of Religious Broadcasting for the . . . BBC."{13} Welch wrote to Lewis, asking if he might be willing to compose a series of broadcast talks for the BBC. Lewis accepted the invitation, and the talks he composed eventually became the first book of his now classic statement of basic theology, *Mere Christianity*.{14} These influential

talks were delivered during the years of World War II.

In addition to these now-famous "broadcast talks," Lewis also spoke to the men and women of the Royal Air Force during the war. Such experiences helped teach Lewis the importance (and even necessity) of "translating" Christian doctrine into terms the average layperson could readily understand. Lewis wanted to communicate Christian truth to his audience, and he realized that to do so effectively, he needed to learn their language.{15} He thus described his task as "that of a *translator*—one turning Christian doctrine . . . into language that unscholarly people would attend to and could understand."{16}

It was Lewis's skill as a "translator" that made him so successful as a "literary evangelist." Few writers have been so effective at communicating the essential truths of Christianity to a broad, general, and often unbelieving audience, as C. S. Lewis. Indeed, Lewis placed so much importance on "translating" Christian truth into the language of the average layperson that he thought every ordination exam ought to require that the examinee demonstrate an ability to do it.{17} And in *Mere Christianity* (along with other works), we get a glimpse of Lewis doing this very thing.

Evangelism in Lewis's Fiction

In discussing the evangelistic work of C. S. Lewis, we've seen how Lewis's evangelistic concerns impacted his work as a popular Christian apologist. Now it's time to consider how these same concerns find expression in his fiction. In his essay, "Sometimes Fairy Stories May Say Best What's to be Said," Lewis discusses a major motivation for his fictional work. He tells us:

> "I wrote fairy tales because . . . I thought I saw how stories of this kind could steal past a certain inhibition

> which had paralysed much of my own religion in childhood. Why did one find it so hard to feel as one was told one ought to feel about God or about the sufferings of Christ? I thought the chief reason was that one was told one ought to. An obligation to feel can freeze feelings. And reverence itself did harm. The whole subject was associated with lowered voices; almost as if it were something medical. But supposing that by casting all these things into an imaginary world, stripping them of their stained-glass and Sunday school associations, one could make them for the first time appear in their real potency? Could one not thus steal past those watchful dragons? I thought one could (OOW, 37).{18}

Through his fiction, Lewis helps his readers personally experience the potency of Christian truth. Consider *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe.* In that story, Edmund (one of the four Pevensie children who enter Narnia through the wardrobe) initially sides with the White Witch against the great lion Aslan. The Witch has all Narnia under her spell, making it "always winter and never Christmas."{19} In his desire to one day be king of Narnia, Edmund betrays his brother and sisters. According to the Deep Magic that governs Narnia, he thus deserves to die.{20}

But Aslan, the true king of Narnia, intercedes for Edmund, and the Witch renounces her claim on his life. The catch is that Aslan must give his own life in place of Edmund's. This he willingly does. But like Jesus in the Gospels, death cannot hold him in its power, and he returns to life again. According to one scholar, "the desired response" to this is not so much "to believe in the vicarious suffering of Christ, but to *taste* it."{21} Lewis thus used his fiction as a vehicle for evangelism, helping his readers to "taste" Christian truth in powerful (and even delightful) ways.

The "Cost" of Lewis's Evangelistic Witness

Although Lewis was not the sort of person one would typically think of when hearing the term "evangelist," he nonetheless had a heart for evangelism and was motivated to labor for the conversion of others. In fact, Christopher Mitchell has observed that "Lewis perceived evangelism to be his lay vocation, and the means by which he expressed this evangelistic impulse were his speaking and writing."{22}

While Lewis was not the sort of person to preach a conventional "Come to Jesus" sort of evangelistic sermon, he was nonetheless (as Michael Ward has noted) "a very successful evangelist."{23} When one considers the vast literary output of Lewis, so much of which had evangelistic intentions, combined with his speaking, preaching, and debating on issues of vital concern to the Christian faith, along with his many prayers for the conversion of others, and generous financial assistance rendered for the cause of Christ, it is clear that the whole tenor of Lewis's post-conversion life was driven by a strong evangelistic impulse for the salvation of souls. And this in spite of the very costly nature of this witness.

According to Mitchell, Lewis's evangelistic commitments fostered "ridicule and scorn . . . among his non-Christian colleagues" at Oxford.{24} Indeed, even some of Lewis's closest friends occasionally felt embarrassed by his "zeal for the conversion of unbelievers."{25} Many of his colleagues were scandalized by the fact that Lewis used his academic training to write popular-level books in theology and Christian apologetics. No doubt some were also jealous of his ever-increasing popularity with the general public, for Lewis had an uncanny ability to write one book after another that people actually wanted to buy and read.

So *why* did Lewis do it? That's the question Mitchell asks near

the end of his essay on this topic.{26} Why did Lewis persist in evangelistic writing and speaking that aroused such scorn from academic colleagues, and occasional embarrassment from friends? Mitchell suggests that it likely had something to do with Lewis's conviction that "There are no *ordinary* people."{27} Hence, while his evangelistic activities created difficulties for him, difficulties that might easily have been avoided, Lewis was convinced that bringing glory to God through the saving of human souls was "the real business of life."{28} And whatever abuse, scorn, or discomfort this might cause him personally, he was apparently willing to endure it in order to be found faithful.

Notes

1. Michael Ward, "Escape to Wallaby Wood: Lewis's Depictions of Conversion," in *Lightbearer in the Shadowlands: The Evangelistic Vision of C. S. Lewis*, ed. Angus J. L. Menuge (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1997), 143.
2. See Philip G. Ryken, "Winsome Evangelist: The Influence of C. S. Lewis," in *Lightbearer in the Shadowlands*, 62.
3. C. S. Lewis, "Cross-Examination," interview by Sherwood E. Wirt, in *God in the Dock*, ed. Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1970), 262.
4. C. S. Lewis, "Rejoinder to Dr. Pittenger," in *God in the Dock*, 181.
5. This would seem to be implied by Lewis's remarks in his sermon, "The Weight of Glory," in *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses*, ed. Walter Hooper (New York, NY: Macmillan, 1980), 18-19.
6. See Christopher W. Mitchell, "Bearing the Weight of Glory: The Cost of C. S. Lewis's Witness," in *The Pilgrim's Guide: C. S. Lewis and the Art of Witness*, ed. David Mills (Grand Rapids, MI: Eeerdmans, 1998), 3-14.
7. C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life* (New York, NY: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1955), 224-25.
8. Ibid., 228-29.
9. Ibid., 224-25.

10. Ibid., 237.
11. Ibid.
12. For readers interested in reading my prior article on this book, please see Michael Gleghorn, “Smuggling Theology into Out of the Silent Planet,” Probe Ministries, October 29, 2023, probe.org/smuggling-theology-into-out-of-the-silent-planet/
13. Please see Michael Gleghorn, “C. S. Lewis, the BBC, and Mere Christianity,” Probe Ministries, April 24, 2016, probe.org/c-s-lewis-the-bbc-and-mere-christianity/
14. For a helpful discussion of all the issues and concerns surrounding these events, please see Justin Phillips, *C. S. Lewis in a Time of War: The World War II Broadcasts that Riveted a Nation and Became the Classic Mere Christianity* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2002).
15. C. S. Lewis, “Christian Apologetics,” in *God in the Dock*, 94, 98.
16. Lewis, “Rejoinder to Dr. Pittenger,” in *God in the Dock*, 183.
17. Lewis, “Christian Apologetics,” in *God in the Dock*, 98-99.
18. C. S. Lewis, “Sometimes Fairy Stories May Say Best What’s to be Said,” in *Of Other Worlds: Essays and Stories*, ed. Walter Hooper (Orlando, FL: Harcourt Brace, 1975), 37.
19. C. S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (New York: Macmillan, 1970), 16.
20. Ibid., 138-39.
21. Doris T. Myers, *C. S. Lewis in Context* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1994), Kindle edition, loc. 2640.
22. Christopher W. Mitchell, “Bearing the Weight of Glory: The Cost of C. S. Lewis’s Witness,” in *The Pilgrim’s Guide: C. S. Lewis and the Art of Witness*, ed. David Mills (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 3.
23. Ward, “Escape to Wallaby Wood,” 143.
24. Mitchell, “Bearing the Weight of Glory,” 7. Note: The whole of this paragraph is indebted to Mitchell’s discussion in this chapter.
25. Ibid., 6-7.
26. Ibid., 9-14.

27. C. S. Lewis, “The Weight of Glory,” 19.
28. C. S. Lewis, “Christianity and Culture,” in *Christian Reflections*, ed. Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 14.

©2025 Probe Ministries

Why Study Church History?

James Detrich provides five reasons to study church history and allow our knowledge to build our confidence in our faith.

When I was in college, we had to do what was called “evangelism night.” It was a night in which a group of us would pile into someone’s old, broken-down car (we were all poor back then) and skirt downtown to the city’s walking bridge, a large half-mile overpass extending over the Chattanooga River. We were always sure that plenty of people would be there that needed our message. One night I began talking to a man about Christ and he quickly cut me off, “I am a Christian,” he exclaimed. “Great,” I replied. As we continue talking, though, I soon discovered that he was a “different” Christian than me. He said he believed in an expansive New Testament that contained many more books than the twenty-seven I was accustomed to, and he had six or seven Gospels, where I only had four. When I told him that I didn’t think he was right, that the New Testament only contained twenty-seven books and four Gospels, he asked me an important question, “How do you know that there are only four Gospels? Maybe there are more books to the Bible than you think!” I stood there, knowing that he was wrong. But I didn’t know *why* he was wrong. I had no idea of how to combat him—I didn’t know church history well enough in order to provide, as 1 Peter 3:15 says, an account of the assurance that lies within me.



This is one of the great reasons why we as Christians need to study church history. In this article I am going to make a passionate plea for the study of church history and give five reasons why I believe it is essential for every follower of Christ. Alister McGrath said that "Studying church history . . . is like being at a Bible study with a great company of people who thought about those questions that were bothering you and others."{1} These bothering questions, much like the one I could not answer on the walking bridge, oftentimes can be answered through learning the stories and lessons of history. It was Martin Luther, the great reformer, who cried out: "History is the mother of truth." This is the first reason why Christians need to study history, so that we can become better skilled to answer the nagging questions that either critics ask or that we ourselves are wrestling with. It would have been a tremendous help that day on the bridge to know that in the second and third centuries, the time right after Jesus and the apostles, that church pastors and theologians were exclaiming and defending the truth that we only possess four Gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. If I had only known of this rich tradition, if I had only known my church history, I would have been able to give a reasonable account of that hope that lies within me.

Church History Provides Comfort

The first reason why Christians should study church history is that it helps Christians provide a more reasonable account of what we believe. The second reason is that Christians, just like any other people, go through many times of loneliness and despair. The book of Psalms reveals multiple times where various psalmists reveal that they feel as though God has left

them, that their enemies are closing in, and that no one, including God, really cares. Suffice it to say that this often leads to a crisis of faith. Many of us suffer that same crisis from time to time, and the one thing that usually helps to be encouraged is to get around God's people. When we are with others who believe as we do, it helps to stabilize, and to build, our faith. There is a sense in those moments of being with other Christians that our faith is bigger and more expansive—that it is communal, not merely individual.

Studying church history is about being with the community of faith. Reading the stories, learning the truths, examining the insights of these faithful men and women down through the centuries gives to us the sense that our faith is not shallow, but as the song used to say, it is "deep and wide." Church historian John Hannah claims that studying Christian heritage "dispels the sense of loneliness and isolation in an era that stresses the peripheral and sensational."{2} It breaks us away from this modern culture that emphasizes the glitz and the glamour of the here and now, and helps us to establish confidence in the faith by examining the beliefs central to our faith that have been developed over a long period of time. Christian theology does not invent beliefs; it finds beliefs already among Christians and critically examines them. The excavation site for Christian theology is not merely in the pages of Scripture, though that is the starting point, but it expands from there into the many centuries as we find the Holy Spirit leading His church. For us today, it gives us the ability to live each day absolutely sure that what we are believing in actually is true; to know and understand that for over 2000 years men and women have been worshipping, praising, and glorifying the same God that we do today.

It's similar to those grand, majestic churches, the cathedrals that overwhelm you with the sense of transcendence. The expansive ceilings, high walls, and stained glass leaves the impression that our faith, our Christian heritage, is not

small but large. Entering into a contemplation of our faith's history is like going into one of those churches. It takes away the loneliness, the isolation, and reminds us of the greatness of our faith.

Church History Solidifies Our Faith

The third reason for studying church history takes us to the task of theology. Have you ever wondered if something you heard being preached in church was essential? Maybe you've asked, Is this really so important to my faith? Understanding and articulating what is most important to Christianity is one of the crucial tasks that theology performs. This task is developed from a historical viewpoint. It asks the question, What has always been crucially important to Christians in each stage of church history? Over the centuries, Christian theologians have developed three main categories for Christian beliefs: dogma, doctrine, and opinion.{3} A belief considered as dogma is deemed to be essential to the gospel; rejecting it would entail apostasy and heresy. Doctrines are developed within a particular church or denomination that help to guide that group in belief. What a church believes is found in its doctrine. Lastly, beliefs relegated to opinion are always interesting, but they are not important in the overall faith of the church. But dogma is important and history tells the story of how the church receives these important truths. It tells the story of how the church came to understand that God is three and one, the received truth of the Trinity; or how they came to understand that Jesus was both human and divine, the received truth of the Person of Christ. In examining these things, you begin to understand what is most essential and what is less important.

This is the same question that was being asked in the early fourth century. Some folks calling themselves Christians were going around proclaiming that Jesus Christ was different from God the Father, that even though He was deserving of worship,

there was a time when He was created by the Father. Other Christians rose up and declared that to be heretical. They claimed that the words and actions of Christ as recorded in the Scripture clearly affirms Him to be equal with the Father. The Council of Nicaea in A.D. 325 sided with the latter group, claiming that Jesus was indeed equal with His Father. The exact wording of the council's conclusion is that Jesus is "of the same substance" with His Father. That dogmatic decision is reflected in the church's doctrinal beliefs and it demonstrates its crucial importance for Christianity.

History is indeed the treasure chest of truth. Open it up. Discover the riches within it. Find out what is there and what is not—what is important and what is not!

Church History Helps Us Interpret the Bible

Why should we study church history? The answers already given are that it provides perspective in answering tough questions, gives a sense that our faith has gravitas, delineates that which is important; the fourth reason is that the study of church history helps us to interpret the Bible. You might been inclined to say, "We don't need church history, all we need is the Bible." But we must remember that people interpret the Bible in many and various ways. For instance, do you know that the largest meeting in North America that discusses the Bible is called the Society of Biblical Literature. It meets every year and boasts of having thousands of members. Among those within the society, only an astonishing 30% of them are evangelicals, or people who would have a more conservative interpretation of Scripture. People all over are reading the Bible, but they are reading it in different ways.

So, how do we know how to interpret the Bible? We believe that a certain interpretation or tradition of the text goes all the way back to Jesus and His apostles. Thus, Scripture must be

interpreted in light of this tradition—the way that the early community of believers read the various texts of Scripture as they recognized its authority in matters of faith and practice. They recognized that these texts supported, explained, and gave evidence to the belief system that they held dear. For us, going back and reading the early church fathers is profitable for our understanding of the broader cultural and theological framework so that we can better understand what Scripture is saying. For instance, as we discovered above, the Trinity is a crucial dogma of the church. Therefore, any interpretation of the Bible that contradicts that basic belief would be inadequate. History helps to paint the lines that we must stay within and it helps to construct the boundaries for a faithful reading of the text. Examining what was important to the apostles, and the generation that followed, and then the next generation, gives a basic tradition, a framework, of values and beliefs, that must guide our faith today. The study of church history helps us to develop that basic framework.

It was a second-century pastor that complained that the heretics of his day read the same Bible as he did, yet they twist it into something else. He equated it someone taking a beautiful picture of a king constructed with precious jewels and rearranging those jewels so that the picture now resembles a dog.{4} We would contest ruining such a beautiful piece of art! This is exactly what happens when the beauty of the Bible is misinterpreted. To keep that from happening, we must study church history and find out what the precious jewels actually are that construct the beauty of the Bible.

Church History Demonstrates the Working of God

We have listed four reasons to study church history: it helps answering questions, it presents a faith that is deep and

wide, it delineates what is important, and it helps us to interpret the Bible. The fifth reason why we should study church history is that it demonstrates the working of God. More specifically, it gives evidence that the Holy Spirit is working through and among His people, the church of God. It is the same Spirit that was working in that early Christian community that is still at work today in the community of faith. In other words, history provides a further resource for understanding the movement of God in the entire community of faith. We affirm that there is continuity between the early Christian community and the community today, because we serve one God and are the one people of that God. Hence, every sector of church history is valuable, because it is the same Spirit moving through every stage of history. Church history is His story and it tells of God's faithfulness to the community of believers as they have carried forth His truth and have given animation to His character. Just as Christ is the image of the invisible God, the church, through the Son and by the Spirit, is also the image of the invisible God. Church history is the story of how the community reflects that invisible God.

This is the concept that brings all the others into a connected whole. The reason why studying church history can provide answers to crucial questions of faith is due to the fact that the Spirit has been moving in the hearts of men and women down throughout history, aiding them in their questions of faith and the fruit of that work has been preserved for us today. The reason why studying church history can show us what is important to the faith is because the Spirit has been at work guiding the church into truth. The reason why studying church history can help us interpret the Bible is because the Spirit has illuminated the path for understanding the Bible for centuries. This is what is fascinating about church history: it is a study of His Story. He is there, just as Jesus said He would be. Remember it was Jesus who said that He was going away, but that He would send a Comforter. And this

One would guide us in all truth. Church history is the story of that illuminated path where the God of the church guides His people into all truth. History is where He is.

Notes

1. Alister McGrath, "The State of the Church Before the Reformation" in *Modern Reformation* [January/February 1994]: 11.
2. John D. Hannah, "Notes on the Church to the Modern Era" (Dallas: Dallas Theological Seminary), 2.
3. Stanley Grenz and Roger Olson, *Who Needs Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 73.
4. This is a metaphor presented by Irenaeus in *Against Heresies*, 1.8.1.

© 2011 Probe Ministries

Gen-Z: The Generation That Ends Christian Influence in America?

In order to grow the number of Gen-Z Christians, we need an understanding of ways to build bridges from their pluralistic, secular worldview to seriously contemplating the unique grace of God. Steve Cable draws upon the wisdom of two pastors who are making a real difference in the lives of young adults to address this important topic.

What Are Gen-Zs Like?



In this article we look beyond the Millennials to consider the latest generation and what they tell us about the future of Evangelicals in America. Gen-Z is the generation born between 1995 and 2010. This year, half of the Gen-Z generation are 18 or older. By the time they are all at least 18, the Millennials and Gen-Zs will make up almost 50% of the adult population. We will consider how this generation compares with previous generations. We want to understand this generation to truly communicate the good news of the gospel to them; to help them "to walk in a manner worth of the Lord."{1}

In their book, *So the Next Generation Will Know*{2}, Sean McDowell and J. Warner Wallace identified some key traits common among Gen-Zs. They are:

1. Digital Multitaskers – "spending nearly every waking hour interacting with . . . digital technology," often while watching television
2. Impatient – quickly moving from thing to thing with an attention span of around 8 seconds
3. Fluid – constantly blurring the lines; making truth, genders, and family structures personal choices
4. Lonely – swamped in social media where personal relationships are minimized while personal troubles follow them everywhere. Sean points to "the availability of endless counterfeits that claim to be able to fill their hearts with meaning."{3}
5. Individualistic – individual feelings more important than facts while judging the choices of others is avoided. As James White points out in Meet Generation Z{4}, "the ability to find whatever they're after without the help of intermediaries . . . has made them more independent. . . . Like no other generation before, Gen-Z faces a widening chasm between wisdom and information."{5}

Most importantly, most of these young Americans are thoroughly secular with little exposure to Christian theology. As White opines, "They are lost. They are not simply living in and being shaped by a post-Christian cultural context. They do not even have a memory of the gospel. . . . They have endless amounts of information but little wisdom, and virtually no mentors."{6}

As they enter adulthood, the culture around them will not encourage them to consider the claims of Christ. In fact, the Millennials going before them are already seen leaving any Christian background behind as they age into their thirties.

Gen-Z: How Are They Trending?

What can we truly know about the religious thinking of Gen-Zs age 11 to 25? Pew Research surveyed teens and their parents giving us a glimpse into both{7}.

They found *one third* of American teens are religiously Unaffiliated.{8} In contrast, their parents were less than *one quarter* Unaffiliated. Another Pew survey{9} found more than *half* of young adult Gen-Zs are unaffiliated. This group is easily the largest religious group among Gen-Zs.

Teens attend church services with their parents, but lag behind in other areas. Less than *one fourth* of teens consider religion very important. And on an absolute belief in God and praying daily, the teens trail their parents significantly.

Using an index of religious commitment{10}, almost *half* of the parents but only *one third* of teens rated high. In fact, almost half of teenagers with parents who rated high did not rate high themselves.{11}

Perhaps the minds of teenagers are mush. Their views will firm up as they age. In reality, older Gen-Zs and Millennials also trail older adults by more than 20 points in believing in God and praying daily.{12} Also, church attendance drops

dramatically among these young adults who are no longer attending with parents.

If religion were important to teens, they would look to religious teaching and beliefs to help make decisions about what is right and wrong. But less than *one third* of teens affiliated with a religion turned to its teachings to make such decisions.

As George Barna reports,{13} "The faith gap between Millennials and their predecessors is the widest intergenerational difference identified at any time in the last seven decades." It seems that Gen-Z will increase this gap.

Gen-Z: Worldview and Apologetics

Why have the Unaffiliated been growing dramatically over the last 25 years while doctrinally consistent Christians have been declining? At one level, we recognize the watered-down gospel taught in many churches encourages people to pursue other things and not waste time on church. That may have been the primary issue at one time. But in this decade, we are seeing a real reduction in the number of Evangelicals as well. The self-professed Evangelicals{14} among those ages 18 to 29 has reduced from 29% down to 20%, a reduction of almost one third.

One major driver is the dominant worldview of our young adult society. The worldview promoted by our schools, media, and entertainment industry has changed from a Christian inspired worldview to a worldview which is secular and specifically anti-Christian. As James White observes, "It's simply a cultural reality that people in a post-Christian world are genuinely incredulous that anyone would think like a Christian—or at least, what it means in their minds to think like a Christian."{15}

Almost all Gen-Zs have been brought up hearing the worldview of Scientism espoused. This worldview teaches "that all that can be known within nature is that which can be empirically verified . . . If something cannot be examined in a tangible, scientific manner, it is not simply unknowable, it is meaningless."{16} At the same time, most Gen-Zs have not even been exposed to an Evangelical Christian worldview. Consequently, apologetics is critical for opening their minds to hear the truth of the gospel. Many of them need to understand that the basic tenets of a Christian worldview can be true before they will consider whether these tenets are true for them. Answering questions such as: "Could there be a creator of this universe?" and "Could that creator possibly be involved in this world which has so much pain and suffering?" is a starting point to opening their minds to a Christian view.

Encouraging Gen-Zs to understand the tenets of their worldview and comparing them to a Christian worldview begins the process of introducing them to the gospel. As White points out, "I have found that discussing the awe and wonder of the universe, openly raising the many questions surrounding the universe and then positing the existence of God, is one of the most valuable approaches that can be pursued."{17} The Christian worldview is coherent, comprehensive and compelling as it explains why our world is the way it is and how its trajectory may be corrected into one that honors our Creator and lifts up people to a new level of life.

Gen-Z: Removing the Isolation of Faith

What will it take to reach Gen-Z? James White says, ". . . the primary reason Gen-Z disconnects from the church is our failure to equip them with a biblical worldview that empowers them to understand and navigate today's culture."{18} If we want to equip Gen-Zs to embrace faith, we must directly discuss worldview issues with them.

The challenge is exacerbated as most Gen-Zs are taught a redefined tolerance: to not only accept classmates with different worldviews, e.g. Muslims and the Unaffiliated, but to believe that it is as true for them as your parents' worldview is for them. As Sean McDowell states, "Gen-Zs are exposed to more competing worldviews—and at an earlier age—than any generation in history."{19}

The new tolerance leads directly to a pluralistic view of salvation. Christ stated, "No one comes to the Father except through me,"{20} and Peter preached that "There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven . . . by which we must be saved."{21} Yet the survey of American teens{22} finds *less than one third* believe that only one religion is true, broken up into *two-thirds* of Evangelicals and *less than one-third* of Mainlines and Catholics.

Compounding these issues is the growing practice of limiting the impact of religious beliefs on real life. Sean points out, "The biggest challenge in teaching worldview to young people is the way our increasingly secular culture fosters the compartmentalization of faith."{23} We need to help them see how a consistent Christian worldview applies to all issues. It is foolish to segregate your spiritual beliefs from your life decisions.

As an example, many Gen-Zs are enamored by a socialist view that the government should provide everything we need, equally distributing goods and services to all. Those who work hard and excel will have their productivity redistributed equally. It sounds like a possibly good approach and yet it has destroyed the economies of many countries including Russia, Cuba, and Venezuela. It fails because it is based on a worldview that "assumes greed comes from inequality in the distribution of material goods in society."{24} In contrast, the Bible is clear that greed is part of the fallenness of the human heart. As a result, any centralized function with no competition discourages productivity and becomes an

inefficient bureaucracy.

Reaching Gen-Zs

Today, most Gen-Zs move into adulthood with little exposure to the gospel. The majority are either Unaffiliated, another religion, or have a nominal Christian background. Current surveys find that 98% of young Americans do not have a Christian worldview.{25}

This sobering data does not mean giving up on reaching Gen-Z. But if we are not intentional about it, we are not going to stem the tide. As James White observes, "What is killing the church today is (focusing) on keeping Christians within the church happy, well fed, and growing. The mission . . . must be about those who have not crossed the line of faith."

And Sean McDowell points out that we need "to teach the difference between subjective and objective truth claims and make sure they understand that Christianity falls in the latter category."{26}

Sean encourages a focus on relationships saying, "Relationships are the runway on which truth lands. Take the time to listen with empathy, monitor from a place of wisdom, and demonstrate your concern."{27} White agrees, saying, "If we want (them) to know the faith, we have to teach, model and incarnate truth in our relationship with them."{28} From a place of relationship, we can address challenges keeping them from truly hearing the gospel.

One key challenge is the role of media. As Sean notes, "Media shapes their beliefs, and it also shapes the orientation of their hearts."{29} To counter this pervasive influence, he suggests engaging them in a skeptic's blog. Help them consider 1) what claim is being made, 2) is the claim relevant if true, and 3) decide how to investigate the claim.{30} By learning to investigate claims, they are examining the truth of the

gospel. We should never fear the gospel coming up short when looking for the truth.

Key ways White's church is connecting with the Unaffiliated include:

1. Rethinking evangelism around Paul's message in Athens. Tantalizing those with no background to search for truth in Christ.
2. Teaching the grace/truth dynamic in quick segments consistent with their learning styles.
3. Being cultural missionaries – learning from those who have not been Christians.
4. Cultivating a culture of invitation by creating tools to invite friends all the time.

If we focus on growing the number of Gen-Z Christians, we could change the trajectory of American faith. If we devote ourselves to prayer, the leadership of the Holy Spirit, and reaching the lost in America rather than continuing church as usual, God can use us to turn the tide.

Notes

1. Colossians 1:9.
2. Josh McDowell and J. Warner Wallace, *So the Next Generation Will Know*, 2019, David C. Cook.
3. McDowell and Wallace, p. 66.
4. James White, *Meet Generation Z: Understanding and Reaching the New Post-Christian World*, Baker Books, 2017.
5. White, p. 44.
6. White, p. 64-65.
7. Pew Research Center, U.S. Teens Take After Their Parents Religiously, Attend Services Together and Enjoy Family Rituals, September 10, 2020.
8. These are people who self-identify as atheist, agnostic or nothing in particular. In previous surveys, we referred to them as the Nones. Calling them the "unaffiliated" helps us avoid the confusion between "Nones" and "nuns."

9. Call out Pew survey from 2019.
10. The index of religious commitment looks at the answers to questions on church attendance, belief in God, prayer, and importance of religion and rates a respondents commitment from high to low based on their answers.
General Social Survey, 2018.
11. 42% of the teenagers with parents with a high index had a medium or low index.
12. General Social Survey, 2018
13. American Worldview Inventory 2020, Cultural Research Center at Arizona Christian University.
14. Pew Research surveys 2007, 2014, 2019.
15. White, p. 130.
16. White, p. 141.
17. White, p. 139.
18. White, p. 80.
19. McDowell and Wallace, p. 81.
20. John 14:6b.
21. Acts 4:12.
22. Pew Research Center, U.S. Teens.
23. McDowell and Wallace, p. 87.
24. Ibid, p. 93.
25. American Worldview Inventory 2020.
26. McDowell and Wallace, p. 113.
27. McDowell and Wallace, p. 78.
28. White, p. 64.
29. McDowell and Wallace, p. 164.
30. Ibid, p. 173-4.

©2021 Probe Ministries

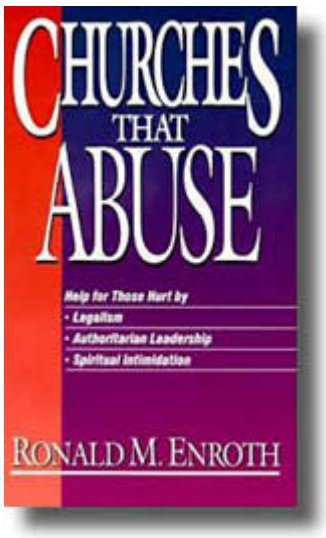
Abusive Churches

What characterizes abusive churches is their cultic method of ministry. Although outwardly orthodox in their theology, these churches use abusive and mind control methods to get their followers to submit to the organization. In this article Dr. Pat Zukeran covers eight characteristics of abusive churches.

This article is also available in Spanish.



We are all familiar with traditional cults such as the Mormons and the Jehovah's Witnesses. There are, however, other groups with cultic characteristics that do not fit the same profile as the traditional cults. Sometimes called "abusive churches" or even "Bible-based cults," they appear outwardly orthodox in their doctrinal beliefs. What distinguishes these groups or churches from genuine orthodox Christianity is their abusive, cultic-like methodology and philosophy of ministry.



In his book *Churches That Abuse*, Dr. Ronald Enroth carefully examines several of these churches throughout the United States. He reveals the cultic methods these groups use and points out several distinguishing marks of abusive churches. At this point I will briefly introduce each of these characteristics and some of my own. Later, I'll discuss all these characteristics in detail.

First, abusive churches have a control-oriented style of leadership. Second, the leaders of such churches often use manipulation to gain complete submission from their members. Third, there is a rigid, legalistic lifestyle involving numerous requirements and minute details for daily life. Fourth, these churches tend to change their names often,

especially once they are exposed by the media. Fifth, denouncing other churches is common because they see themselves as superior to all other churches. Sixth, these churches have a persecution complex and view themselves as being persecuted by the world, the media, and other Christian churches. Seventh, abusive churches specifically target young adults between eighteen and twenty-five years of age. The eighth and final mark of abusive churches is the great difficulty members have in getting out of or leaving these churches, a process often marked by social, psychological, or emotional pain.

Those involved in a church that seems to reflect these characteristics would be wise to evaluate the situation thoroughly and leave the church if it is appropriate. Staying may increase the risks of damaging your family relationships and multiplies the likelihood of losing your perspective. Members of such churches often develop a distorted view of reality, distrust everyone, and suffer from stress, fear, and depression. Some former members even continue to experience these things after escaping from an abusing church. There are also several documented cases in which associating with an abusive church has led to the deaths of individuals or their relatives.

Some of these groups have networks of many sister churches. In some cases these groups have split off from more mainstream denominations. Occasionally the new groups have even been denounced by the founding denomination. Such groups often disguise themselves by frequently changing the name of their organization, especially following adverse publicity. This practice makes the true nature of these organizations more difficult to determine for the unsuspecting individual. Some abusive churches have college ministries all across the country. On some university campuses such student movements are among the largest groups on their respective campuses.

It is important that Christians today know the Bible and know

how to recognize such churches so as not to fall into their traps. In order to help people become more aware of churches which may be abusing their members, I now want to go through in more detail the eight characteristics I mentioned earlier.

Control-Oriented Leadership

A central feature of an abusive church is control-oriented leadership. The leader in an abusive church is dogmatic, self-confident, arrogant, and the spiritual focal point in the lives of his followers. The leader assumes he is more spiritually in tune with God than anyone else. He claims insight into Scripture that no one else has. Or, he may state that he receives personal revelations from God. Because of such claims, the leader's position and beliefs cannot be questioned; his statements are final. To members of this type of church or group, questioning the leader is the equivalent of questioning God. Although the leader may not come out and state this fact, this attitude is clearly seen by the treatment of those who dare to question or challenge the leader. The leader of the movement often makes personal decisions for his followers. Individual thinking is prohibited; thus the followers become dependent on the leader.

In the hierarchy of such a church, the leader is, or tends to be, accountable to no one. Even if there is an elder board, it is usually made up of men who are loyal to, and will never disagree with, the leader. This style of leadership is not one endorsed in the Bible. According to Scripture all believers have equal access to God and are equal before Him because we are made in His image, and we are all under the authority of the Word of God. In 1 Thessalonians 5:21 believers are directed to measure all teachings against the Word of God. Acts 17:11 states that even the apostle Paul was under the authority of the Bible, and the Bereans were commended because they tested Paul's teachings with the Scriptures. Leaders and laity alike are to live according to Scripture.

Manipulation of Members

Abusive churches are characterized by the manipulation of their members. Manipulation is the use of external forces to get others to do what someone else wants them to do. Here manipulation is used to get people to submit to the leadership of the church. The tactics of manipulation include the use of guilt, peer pressure, intimidation, and threats of divine judgment from God for disobedience. Often harsh discipline is carried out publicly to promote ridicule and humiliation.

Another tactic is the "shepherding" philosophy. As practiced in many abusive churches this philosophy requires every member to be personally accountable to another more experienced person. To this person, one must reveal all personal thoughts, feelings, and discuss future decisions. This personal information, is not used to *help* the member, but to *control* the member.

Another means of control is isolation. Abusive churches may cut off contact between a new member and his family, friends, and anyone else not associated with the church.

How different this style of leadership is from the leadership of Jesus, the Good Shepherd who lovingly, gently, humbly, and sacrificially leads His sheep.

Rigid, Legalistic Lifestyle

The third characteristic of abusive churches is the rigid, legalistic lifestyle of their members. This rigidity is a natural result of the leadership style. Abusive churches require unwavering devotion to the church from their followers. Allegiance to the church has priority over allegiance to God, family, or anything else.

Often members are required or pressured to attend Bible studies five, six, or seven days a week. There is a

requirement to do evangelism; a certain quota of contacts must be met, and some churches even require members to fill out time cards recording how many hours they spent in evangelism, etc. Daily schedules are made for the person; thus he is endlessly doing the church's ministry. Former members of one church told me they were working for their church from 5:00 am to 12:00 midnight five days a week.

Members of such churches frequently drop out of school, quit working, or even neglect their families to do the work required by the church. There are also guidelines for dress, dating, finances, and so on. Such details are held to be of major importance in these churches.

In churches like these, people begin to lose their personal identity and start acting like programmed robots. Many times, the pressure and demands of the church will cause a member to have a nervous breakdown or fall into severe depression. As I reflect on these characteristics I think of Jesus' words concerning the Pharisees who "tie up heavy loads and put them on men's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger" (Matt. 23: 4). What a contrast from the leadership style of Jesus who said, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you. . . .For my yoke is easy and my burden is light" (Matt. 11:28-30).

Frequent Changing of Group/Church Name

A fourth characteristic of abusive churches is a pattern of constantly changing the name of the church or campus ministry. Often a name change is a response to unfavorable publicity by the media. Some abusive churches have changed their name several times in the course of a few years.

If you are in such a church, one that has changed its name several times because of bad publicity, or if you feel unceasing pressure to live up to its demands, it is probably

time to carefully evaluate the ministry of the church and your participation in it.

Denouncing All Other Churches

Let us now take a look at the fifth characteristic: abusive churches usually denounce all other Christian churches. They see themselves as spiritually elite. They feel that they alone have the truth and all other churches are corrupt. Therefore, they do not associate with other Christian churches. They often refer to themselves as some special group such as, "God's Green Berets," "The faithful remnant," or "God's end-time army." There is a sense of pride in abusive churches because members feel they have a special relationship with God and His movement in the world. In his book *Churches That Abuse*, Dr. Ron Enroth quotes a former member of one such group who states, "Although we didn't come right out and say it, in our innermost hearts we really felt that there was no place in the world like our assembly. We thought the rest of Christianity was out to lunch." However the Bible makes it clear, that there are no spiritually elite groups or churches. Ephesians 4:36 states, "Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope, when you were called, one Lord, one faith, one baptism; One God and Father of all."

The Christian church universal is united by the same God, the same Holy Spirit, and the fundamental beliefs of the Bible which include such things as the Trinity, authority of the Bible, the death and resurrection of Jesus, the deity of Christ, justification by faith alone, and so on. In these central truths we stand united. A church which believes itself to be elite and does not associate with other Christian churches is not motivated by the spirit of God but by divisive pride.

Persecution Complex

The sixth characteristic follows naturally. Because abusive churches see themselves as elite, they expect persecution in the world and even feed on it. Criticism and exposure by the media are seen as proof that they are the true church being persecuted by Satan. However, the persecution received by abusive churches is different from the persecution received by Jesus and the Apostles.

Jesus and the Apostles were persecuted for preaching the truth. Abusive churches bring on much of their negative press because of their own actions. Yet, any criticism received, no matter what the source—whether Christian or secular—is always viewed as an attack from Satan, even if the criticisms are based on the Bible. This makes it difficult to witness to a person in such a church for he will see your attempt to share the gospel with him as persecution. Often in cases like these, when I am accused of persecuting, I simply reply, "I am here talking to you with the Word of God which you say you believe. How can this be persecution?" This approach often helps in continuing the dialogue with a member of an abusive church who has been brainwashed to believe that all opposition is persecution.

Targeting Young Adults

The seventh characteristic of abusive churches is that they tend to target young adults ages 18-25 who are in the middle class, well educated, idealistic, and often immature Christians. Young adults are the perfect age group to focus on because they are often looking for a cause to give their lives to, and they need love, affirmation, and acceptance. Often these churches will provide this, and the leaders frequently take the role of surrogate parents.

Painful Exit Process

The eighth characteristic is a painful and difficult exit process. Members in many such churches are afraid to leave because of intimidation, pressure, and threats of divine judgment. Sometimes members who exit are harassed and pursued by church leaders. The majority of the time, former members are publicly ridiculed and humiliated before the church, and members are told not to associate in any way with any former members. This practice is called shunning.

Many who leave abusive churches because of the intimidation and brainwashing, actually feel they have left God Himself. None of their former associates will fellowship with them, and they feel isolated, abused, and fearful of the world. One former member of a particular campus ministry said, "If you leave without the leadership's approval, condemnation and guilt are heaped upon you. My pastor told me he thought it was satanic for me to leave and wondered if I could continue my salvation experience."

Let me conclude this discussion by sharing some practical ways of reaching those who are involved in abusive churches. First, we must begin with prayer. Witnessing to those brainwashed in abusive churches is often intimidating and difficult. Often leaders will not allow an individual member to meet with an outsider unless accompanied by an older, more experienced person who is trained in debating and/or intimidation. Therefore, we must pray (1) for a chance to speak with the individual{1} and that he would be open to what we have to share.{2}

Second, lovingly confront the person and surface some biblical issues. Often, abusive churches have a bizarre teaching or a theological error that can be pointed out. In his book *Churches That Abuse*, Dr. Ron Enroth documents several examples of this. For instance, the leader of one church had strange teachings based on his claims of extra-biblical revelations

from God.{3} These included dietary laws, sexual behavior, home decorations, and others. The leader of another group called doctors "medical deities." He also claimed medicines had demonic names and if taken, opened a person up to demonic influence.{4} Pointing out errors, inconsistencies, and bizarre beliefs may open the individual's mind and prompt him to begin asking questions.

Third, share articles you may find in the newspaper or in magazines on the particular church under discussion. The book that I have often quoted from, *Churches That Abuse*, is an excellent resource. The key is to get the individual to start asking questions and research answers for himself. Tell him to test everything with the Scriptures and not to be afraid to ask questions. If the leader is afraid or hesitant to answer a member's honest questions, the maturity of that leadership may be suspect.

Jesus, however, said that truth is a means of freedom, not bondage. He said, "You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free" (John 8:32).

Notes

1. Ronald Enroth, *Churches That Abuse* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1992), p. 118.

2. Ibid., p. 181.

3. Ibid., p. 128.

4. Ibid., p. 170.

©1993 Probe Ministries.

God Space: Where Spiritual Conversations Happen Naturally

Dr. Michael Gleghorn offers an introduction and overview of Doug Pollock's book by the same title. Those who want to learn more about how to have natural and effective spiritual conversations are encouraged to read (and apply) Pollock's book for themselves.

Creating God Space



If you're a Christian, you probably wrestle from time to time with how best to share your faith with non-Christian friends and family. I mean, let's face it. We often *want* to share our faith. But we're a bit confused (maybe even overwhelmed) with how to go about it in a natural and non-threatening way. *Is* there a way to have spiritual conversations naturally?

According to Doug Pollock, the answer is "Yes"—and it all begins with something he calls "God Space." "I often wonder," he says, "what would happen if . . . the body of Christ could create low-risk, high-grace places for people to pursue their need to have spiritual conversations."{1} But Doug not only wonders about it, he's also spent the better part of his adult life actually doing it—and training others to do it too. Although he's had many roles, he's probably best known for his work as an author, speaker, and evangelism trainer for Athletes in Action.{2} His passion, however, is pointing people to Christ through spiritual conversations in which people have the freedom to simply be themselves.

You see, Doug believes that people actually want (and even

need) to have such conversations. Moreover, they're often even willing to have them. The problem, of course, is that such conversations can often seem intimidating—even threatening—to both Christian and non-Christian alike. So Doug advocates creating a "safe space" in which to have such conversations. But he warns us that for many non-Christians in our world today, the church is often *not* perceived as safe.{3} Hence, he says, if we want to reach people for Christ, then *we've* got to go to *them*—and help create a "safe space" for spiritual conversations right where they are.

Doug calls it "God Space" —a space where "God is . . . encountered in . . . ways that address the longings and cries of the heart." In God Space "the 'unworthy' feel safe enough to bring their real selves . . . into the light, and to journey, one step at a time, toward the magnetic pull they sense deep in their souls." It's a space where "spiritual curiosity is aroused, and the message of Christianity becomes plausible."{4}

Does this sound like something you'd be interested in learning more about? Then keep reading as we consider Doug's book in more detail.

Spiritual Conversation-Killers

Doug Pollock offers some great advice about how to have natural, non-threatening spiritual conversations with those who don't know Christ. Before discussing this advice in more detail, however, we first need to pause and consider some of the ways in which we might unintentionally shut-down, or "kill," a spiritual conversation before it even has a chance to get going.

Doug describes ten "spiritual conversation-killers" in his book. Although we can't discuss them all, we'll at least mention a few of them. To get started, think of the non-Christian people you know and interact with on a somewhat

regular basis. How many of them would be interested in having a "low-risk, high-grace" spiritual conversation with you? If your answer is few to none of them, then you might be guilty of the most basic spiritual conversation-killer of them all: "an unbelieving heart."{5} If we assume that the non-Christians we know aren't interested in talking about spiritual things, then we probably won't have many spiritual conversations with them.

And Doug says this is a big mistake. "I've had spiritual conversations with people all over the world," he writes, "including the supposed 'tough places.' I think it's because the Holy Spirit has given me a conviction that if God has put eternity in every person's heart, which is what Ecclesiastes 3:11 tells us, then *all* people were made for spiritual conversations."{6} So let's not "kill" an opportunity for spiritual conversations because of unbelief. Instead, let's assume that if we approach such conversations wisely, we'll find people eager to talk with us.

Okay, so how do we approach such conversations wisely? In my opinion, the best way to have good *spiritual* conversations is simply to apply some of the very same principles that go into having good conversations of any sort.{7} For example, how well would my conversation go if I was disrespectful of the other person's beliefs or opinions? Or what if I came across as harsh, combative, or domineering? Would such conversations be successful? Probably not. And if that's the case with everyday conversations, then it's probably the case with spiritual conversations too. So if we want to have good spiritual conversations, we need to be humble, gracious, kind and polite. If not, we'll probably "kill" whatever spiritual conversations we might otherwise have had. And when that happens, no one wins.

Wondering Your Way Into Spiritual Conversations

In *God Space: Where Spiritual Conversations Happen Naturally,* Doug has four great chapters on *noticing, serving, listening,* and *wondering* your way into spiritual conversations. For our purposes, let's direct our attention to that final chapter, which involves "wondering" our way into spiritual conversations. "Of all the things you'll read in this book," Doug tells us, "this chapter holds the most promise if you truly want to see the quality and quantity of your spiritual conversations increase."{8}

So how does it work? How do we *wonder* our way into spiritual conversations? As Doug lays it out for us, there are essentially two steps. First, we have to be really good listeners.{9} If we're not actively listening to what people are telling us, then we're not going to have much to wonder about. That's because we *wonder* our way into spiritual conversations by asking good questions about what another person is telling us. That's step two. After listening carefully to what the other person is saying, we begin to wonder "out loud" by asking questions that are relevant to the conversation we're having.{10}

According to Doug, "good wondering questions" will "flow naturally out of your context and . . . conversations." They reveal "that you have listened thoughtfully." They "are open-ended and promote more dialogue and reflection." They "probe sensitively and reflectively into someone's belief systems." And finally, such questions encourage "others to investigate the Christian life" for themselves.{11}

So by listening carefully and asking good "wondering" questions about what you're being told, you can open the door to all sorts of spiritual conversations. Doug even offers some examples of "good ways to

start wondering."{12} Suppose your conversation partner has made an interesting claim or expressed an intriguing perspective on some issue. You might respond by saying, "That's an interesting perspective; I'm wondering how you arrived at that conclusion?"{13} Notice how such a question not only demonstrates an interest in, and respect for, the other person and their views—it also serves to keep the conversation moving forward in a positive direction. Indeed, once you get a knack for listening carefully and asking good wondering questions, who knows how many spiritual conversations you might find yourself having!

Bringing the Bible Into Your Conversations

Let's now discuss Doug's advice about bringing the Bible into our conversations.{15}

The word of God is powerful. Paul describes it as "the sword of the Spirit."{16} And the author of Hebrews tells us it can "judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart." {17} Indeed, it's partly because the Bible *is* so powerful, that we need to be careful about the way in which we bring it into our conversations.

As Doug reminds us, "If people sense you're trying to use the Bible as an authoritative 'crowbar' to beat them into submitting to your viewpoint, your conversation is likely over. However, if you humbly ask for permission to introduce the Scriptures into your dialogue, 'deep spiritual magic' begins to happen."{18} The key point here, of course, is *asking for permission*. This is important and Doug encourages us to always make a habit of it.{19} After all, if the person has given you permission to share something from the Bible, then they won't feel awkward or threatened when you do so. And if they *haven't* given you permission, then it's probably better just to wait and pray for a more opportune time.

Okay, that sounds good. But how can we know when it's right to ask for permission? Here we need a measure of wisdom and even plain common sense. In general, however, when the person expresses an *interest* in some issue about which the Bible speaks, it might be a good time to ask for *permission* to share what the Bible says. Doug gives the example of talking with some non-Christian college students about the meaning of love.{20} The students were intensely interested in this topic, but they were having a hard time defining what the word even meant. After discussing the issue for a bit, Doug asked for permission to share what the Bible has to say about love. Having gotten their permission, he directed them to the famous love passage in 1 Corinthians 13. Primed and ready, the students eagerly listened to what the Bible had to say. Its message had suddenly become relevant to them, for it spoke directly to an issue about which they cared deeply.

If we could learn how to introduce the Bible like *that*, our non-Christian friends might be more eager to hear what it says. In the next section we'll conclude our discussion of Doug's book by considering "missed opportunities" and "burned bridges."{21}

Missed Opportunities and Burned Bridges

We've considered several ways to improve our conversations, but it's easy to make mistakes. So now we'll consider Doug's advice about "missed opportunities" and "burned bridges." Can "missed opportunities" be reclaimed and "burned bridges" be rebuilt? And if so, then how do we do it?

Let's first consider missed opportunities. Suppose you had a conversation with a neighbor who made a comment that left a wide-open door for spiritual conversation—and you said . . . nothing. We've probably all had conversations like this. Maybe the comment caught us off guard, and we just weren't sure how to respond. Or maybe we felt too tired, or scared, or something else. Whatever the reason, we can "reclaim" such

missed opportunities. It's often not even that hard. Doug tells of missing out on a great opportunity because he just wasn't sure what to say. About a month later, however, he got another opportunity. He told the person that he'd been thinking a lot about a comment which they had previously made. Intrigued, the person asked what it was—and almost immediately they were right back where they had left off a month earlier!{22}

Okay, that's the easy one. But what if we *didn't* remain silent. What if we said the *wrong* thing— and now feel like we've burned our bridges with another person? Granted, this is more difficult. But Doug throws down a challenge. For once we recognize and admit our mistake to ourselves, we can then confess it to God and bring the issue before Him in prayer. After praying about it, Doug says, we can actually go to the person and let them know that we've been thinking about how we "come across" in spiritual conversations. We can even ask if they'd be willing to give us "some honest feedback" about how others might perceive us in this area. And if so, then we can listen carefully and apologize for any mistakes we might have made. Of course, we can't predict how the other person will respond. But by taking this approach, we can go a long way toward restoring the relationship.{23}

If you'd be interested in creating some "God Space" for your own conversations, then I encourage you to get (and read) Doug's book for yourself. I think you'll be really glad you did.

Notes

1. Doug Pollock, *God Space: Where Spiritual Conversations Happen Naturally* (Loveland, CO: Group, 2009), 11-12.
2. For more on Doug, check out his website: www.godsgps.com/
3. Pollock, *God Space*, 16.
4. The citations in this paragraph can be found in Pollock, *God Space,* 20-21.

5. This is “Killer 1” in Doug’s view. See Pollock, *God Space*, 24.
6. Ibid., 25.
7. In what follows, I briefly mention several of the spiritual conversation-killers which Doug discusses on pp. 29-32. Specifically, Doug mentions conversation “killers” like disrespect, control, judgment and combativeness.
8. Pollock, *God Space*, 65.
9. See Doug’s chapter, “Listening Your Way Into Spiritual Conversations,” in Pollock, *God Space*, 53-64.
10. Ibid., 14.
11. All of the quoted material in this paragraph comes from a section on “Good Wondering Questions” in Pollock, *God Space*, 73.
12. See the examples under this section heading in Pollock, *God Space*, 73.
13. Ibid., 73.
14. This is one way in which Doug likes to refer to non-Christians. See Pollock, *God Space*, 16.
15. See Pollock’s chapter 9, “Bringing the Bible into your Conversations,” in *God Space*, 87-99.
16. Ephesians 6:17.
17. Hebrews 4:12 (NASB).
18. Pollock, *God Space*, 95.
19. Ibid., 93.
20. See the discussion in Pollock, *God Space*, 90-94.
21. Doug discusses this topic in chapter 10, “Reclaiming Missed Opportunities and Rebuilding Burned Bridges,” 100-106.
22. Doug shares this story on pp. 101-103.
23. The citations in this paragraph come from Doug’s discussion on p. 106.

©2015 Probe Ministries, updated 2018

The Professor: Why Are You a Christian? – When Challenged, Can You Defend Your Faith in Christ

Are our adults ready to give a defense of the gospel? When challenged, can they give a reasonable explanation of their faith? Dr. Bohlin presents a sobering view of this question based upon years of experience questioning high school and college-age students on the basis for their belief in Christ. By exposing their lack of cogent answers to questions they may be asked, he challenges them to spend time exploring the questions and developing biblical worldview-based answers.

The Professor

Over the last ten years, I have used a very effective technique to help teens realize their unpreparedness for the step toward college. It seems our young people are heading into public and even Christian colleges thinking they are ready for the challenge to their faith that higher learning can be.

Probe Ministries has sponsored a college prep conference since 1991 that was designed to help young people gain some insights and even some knowledge on how to address the intellectual challenges that college will provide.

If you remember the thousands of college radicals who protested and picketed in the '60s and '70s, they found their push for change was not very effective. Instead, many of them stayed in college, obtained Masters Degrees and PhDs. After all, it was easier than getting a real job! As a result, they are now your children's professors!

The college campus was an anti-Christian breeding ground several decades ago and now it is even worse. Christianity is not so much openly mocked as it is marginalized and deemed a false and mischievous mythology.

If you haven't already heard some of these statistics, you need to hold onto your hat.

In 2007, LifeWay surveyed 23- to 30-year-olds and found that seventy percent had taken at least a one year break from church during their college years.{1} Now, almost two-thirds of these return to some level of church attendance, but mainly to please family or friends who encouraged them to return. That means that most of our churched youth are making many of their life decisions, including marriage and career, apart from a church context. Even many who return carry numerous scars from bad choices during those years.{2}

With this statistical background, it's plain our young people need some preparation before going on to college or the military. But as most parents of teens know, just telling them they need this is less than likely to be convincing.

Enter the Professor. The technique I mentioned at the beginning is to impersonate an atheistic college professor doing research on the religious beliefs of young people. Sometimes the students know I am playing a role with them, but occasionally I play the professor and the students are none the wiser.

A Simple Question

When I step to the front of the room, I introduce myself as Professor Hymie Schwartz (a name borrowed from my late colleague Jerry Solomon who played this role far better than I do). I tell the group that, since I am conducting research on the religious beliefs of young people, their youth pastor, counselor, principal, teacher—whatever, has allowed me to

visit with them.

I begin the conversation something like this: “Since this is a church or Christian school I presume you are all Christians. Is anyone not a Christian?” Of course no one raises their hand. But I am always aware that some may indeed not be believers and may not appreciate my questioning so I am always paying attention.

At this point I simply call on someone, usually someone who isn’t really paying attention or is engrossed in conversation with a neighbor. “You! Are you a Christian?” No one has ever answered no. Upon receiving an affirmative answer, with hands casually stuck in my pockets, I demand, “Why?”

Students are paying attention now. This is for real. Now consider my question for yourself. If Peter warns us to always be ready to give an answer to anyone who asks to give a defense for the hope that we have, this is a pretty basic question. In our highly secular culture, if someone finds out you’re a Christian, they may indeed ask you why. Peter says you ought to have an answer.

But this simple question why is usually something our young people, and even their parents, have never really considered. Their Christian faith is certainly something they would claim is central to their lives, but the dumbfounded looks on their faces tells me repeatedly that this question is a new one.

It’s usually about this time that any parents sitting in the back are suddenly quite relieved I’m not talking to them!

By asking such questions, I can get them pretty riled up and confused. The point is not to have fun but to help them see that they need to be prepared and think a little about why Christianity is important to them and why they think it’s true.

“I Asked Jesus into My Heart!”

Having their Christianity questioned usually comes as a surprise and even shock. Rather than directly answering the question, they try to tell me *how* they became a Christian. It usually takes the form of confidently saying they asked Jesus into their heart.

The professor quickly fires back, “You asked Jesus into your heart?! That sounds pretty gross, really. What’s he doing in there with all that blood? Yuck!” That always gets a surprised reaction and a little befuddlement. The student typically tries to recover by saying something like, “No, I mean it’s like I trusted Jesus as my Savior.”

Again the professor will fire back quickly with a question like, “Why did you do that?” or “Savior? What did you need saving from?” I think you can see where this is going. It really is not difficult to pick something from what he or she said and challenge it. I either pretend I don’t understand what they said, forcing them to better explain themselves (which is rare), or I deliberately ask them why they think that way, or how they know that.

In answer to “How do you know that?” I am often told that “It says so in the Bible!” They usually can’t tell me where the Bible says that. I also ask if the Bible is true, and they say it is. But when I ask, “How do you know it’s true?” the blank stare reemerges.

Sometimes a student will say, “Because it’s the word of God!” Now I can really dig a little deeper. In response to further questioning, they usually can’t tell me where the Bible says it’s the Word of God nor can they tell me why the Bible is different from The Book of Mormon or the Qur’an. If there is a youth pastor or chaplain present there is usually an embarrassed look on their face or a head buried in their hands.

By this time the class is very tense and full of nervous laughter. When I reach a dead end with a student—for instance when they say, “I don’t know” with a very resigned and defeated voice—I look for one of the laughing students and ask, “What about you?” Of course that gets everybody’s attention again and off we go.

While I admit I have a little fun playing this role, it never ceases to break my heart at how ill-prepared our young people are to follow Peter’s advice to always be prepared with an answer. I have yet to find a student in ten years who is willing and able to go toe-to-toe with the professor.

“You’re a Narrow-Minded, Self-Righteous Bigot!”

Here are three other directions our conversations have frequently taken.

When I have challenged students to tell me why they think or believe Christianity is true, some will turn to their own subjective experience. Technically, there is nothing wrong with this, specifically when speaking to a Christian audience. But someone who doesn’t even believe in God will frequently find ways to truly make fun of this element.

A student may describe that Jesus speaks to them in their prayer time, to which I quickly ask what His voice sounds like or how they know it was Jesus and not indigestion. The blank stares usually resume at this point. We have become so comfortable in our Christian bubble sometimes that we frequently don’t see how unintelligible our language is to those outside the community of faith. It’s tough to share the gospel that way.

Sometimes a student will interject that they believe in Jesus because that’s what their family has taught them or it’s what

they learned in church. I usually pounce on that pretty quickly and repeat that this student believes Christianity is true because their parents told them so. The student usually agrees. After commending them for honoring their parents I tell them that's really pretty stupid. Pausing a second for the shock to register, I go on about the boy raised in India whose parents are Hindu and he respects his parents and believes Hinduism is true, so the boy in India and this student are both headed to heaven because they trusted their parents!

One time a student stammered around and eventually agreed with my statement as his youth pastor put his head in his hands.

Finally in talking about salvation I ask what happens to those who don't believe in Jesus. Most will hesitatingly say they go to hell. The professor predictably rants, "Just because I don't believe the same fairy tale as you, I'm going to hell?" When they predictably shake their head yes, I get down eye to eye and spit out, "You're a narrow minded, self-righteous bigot!"

Always Be Ready to Give an Answer, with Gentleness and Respect

Students enjoy the interactive nature of this routine even though they are routinely embarrassed by their inability to handle the challenge. When Peter admonished all of us to always be ready to give an answer to everyone who asks us for a reason for the hope that we have, yet with gentleness and respect (1 Pet. 3:15), they fail miserably. Perhaps as a parent, you may be glad that I don't do this with adult groups.

Often students will try to turn the conversation in their favor by asking the professor a question. I quickly dismiss that idea by simply answering that *I'm* asking the questions.

But when we're done, if time allows I attempt to leave them with hope by quickly summarizing how I, Dr. Ray Bohlin, Vice-President of Probe Ministries, would answer the same question.

Here's the outline of my response. In a calm voice I quickly assert that I know there is a God. As a scientist I look principally at how marvelously our universe, galaxy, solar system, and planet are designed for complex life here on earth. The number of highly improbable coincidences rules out chance and strongly implies design. This is reinforced by the evidence from biology of the incredible complexity of life, particularly the coded information in DNA. This remarkable molecule with its accompanying system of transcription and translation screams for intelligence.

The fact that all people have some sense of right and wrong, even though we may disagree sometimes, tells us we are comparing our morality to some invisible standard outside ourselves that must come from a supreme Law Giver. I am convinced there is a supernatural God.

If this God exists, then has He spoken to man? I quickly tell about the uniqueness of Scripture, written by forty authors from eight countries over fifteen hundred years in three languages and all with a consistent and unique message of a God of love who ransomed us from our sins. Where we have archaeological evidence it consistently confirms the accuracy of biblical events. I am convinced the Bible is the true and unique Word of God.

The Bible throughout is about Jesus, who repeatedly claimed to be the unique divine Son of God and offered his death and resurrection on behalf of mankind as proof. That Jesus bodily rose from the dead is the only rational conclusion of the evidence of the empty tomb. On top of that, my personal experience of the last thirty-seven years has shown me again and again the unique love and power of God.

So what about you? Why are *you* a Christian?

Notes

1. “LifeWay Research Uncovers Reasons 18 to 22 Year Olds Drop Out of Church,” 2007, www.lifeway.com/article/165949/, accessed May 15, 2010.
2. Youth Transition Network has researched this problem over the last ten years and has excellent resources, videos, research, and books and DVDs for purchase. Take a look at www.ytn.org.

© 2010 Probe Ministries