

“How Do I Witness to People Conditioned for Soundbites?”

First let me say what an encouragement your site is to me. I truly enjoy engaging my mind about my faith and your site is a wonderful catalyst for this experience, I find too often that the church has a very anti-intellectual attitude, which brings me to my first of two questions:

1. For all the talk about using the mind in the Christian faith it at least in my opinion seems to be a hollow protest because our culture is absolutely mindless, both the secular side and the Christian side (generally outside of academia and some exceptions). I suppose what I'm saying is that I have found my desire to be a well thinking Christian a handicap for witnessing and contending for my faith in the normal everyday practical world, where people my age speak in slang, are induced by degenerate immoral images, and have grown up being bombarded with billions of bits of emotional, and psychological information throughout their lives, normal people barely want to hear a well thought out statement anymore about anything because they are conditioned for soundbites and have been culturally reborn impatient, how am I to practically deal with this dilemma when I witness, and still keep my intellectual mind from going insane?? Or how do you deal with people who ask straw man questions?? Questions that are asked and really are framed in such a way that no answer is beneficial to actually knowing the truth but only serves to trap the Christian thinker in such a way that whatever answer he gives will just dig his own hole???

How am I to practically deal with this dilemma when I witness, and still keep my intellectual mind from going insane??

It can be very frustrating trying to reason with people who

aren't interested in or haven't been prepared to think well. But reason is the only tool we have (humanly speaking) to combat this problem. We can't turn to, say, force to bring people around. That will only enforce the "will to power" mentality of our age—that might makes right. So what we must do is take people to those issues which they do think about to get them into a mental framework suitable for thinking about spiritual matters. Of course, once the topic of religion comes up they might very well shift to a "this works for me" or "whatever you believe" attitude. At that point, however, we can simply ask if they think religion falls into a special category where thinking is prohibited, and if so, why. If they should say that religion deals with abstract ideas, we can point them to the factual aspects of Christianity. People who aren't interested in thinking or who are convinced that thinking is unnecessary or prohibited in certain areas cannot be intellectually pressed to think. We have to sneak in the back door, as it were. Get them thinking, and then shift to the things we want them to think about.

Or how do you deal with people who ask straw man questions??

If they should ask straw man questions, we can ask them (gently) the relevance of the question. If they seem to be simply out to trap us, we can ask how significant the particular issue is. I see no problem with pointing out that it seems they're trying to trap us! We can ask if they're serious about discussing the issue.

2. The second question deals with form criticism and its related annoyances. If Christianity is actually "true" and not just something that is relatively true as long as people believe in it, during the time when Christ was on earth why did no one actually write immense volumes of material about what He actually did while He was doing it??? He was GOD for goodness sake?!? I mean according to the gospels he healed tons of people and did things people never saw before, but we don't really have any actual at hand testimony of this

stuff??? Yes we have outside historical references, but honestly they are seriously lacking in content, and the gospels conservatively estimated about 50 years after his ascension? I have honestly thought about this, and it just makes me wonder??? Yes I have evaluated the lives of the apostles and alot of the other evidences for Christianity but sometimes it just seems as though God decided to make it either/or. It could be a lie and a bunch of stories formed down through time or it could be true: why didn't God make the evidence clear and bulletproof? I have never understood this. It just seems the whole thing seems dependent on man's thinking and not on God's clear revelation. (Did he make it really clear if no one really wrote about until at least 50 years later?) Like biblical scholars will sugar up the outside historical references and stuff. Perhaps my thinking is flawed here, any answer you have to remove this diffuculty will certainly help??

A good recent work of apologetics for these questions is Lee Strobel's *The Case for Christ*. I encourage you to get a copy and read the fuller answers to your questions. I'll also refer below to John Bloom's article "[Why Isn't the Evidence Clearer?](#)".

You said there is no "at hand testimony." What about that of Matthew, John, James and Peter? Surely these apostles and New Testament writers had direct experience with Christ. Paul was taught by the risen Lord. Luke did his research carefully, talking to those who walked with Christ.

Regarding the dates of the New Testament writings: The book of Acts must have been written before A.D. 62, since it contains no mention of Paul's death. Thus, Luke must have been written before that, and Mark before Luke (since Luke drew from Mark). This puts two of the Gospels within 30 years of Jesus.

Why weren't there mountains of writings about Jesus from his time? Perhaps because journalism as we know it wasn't

practiced then. It seems apparent that people did write down things Jesus said and did. But we wouldn't expect the kind of written coverage historical events get today.

Why didn't God make it all clearer? John Bloom has a few suggestions. He notes first:

There are two reasonable demands for any set of evidence. First, the evidence should be clear enough to be intellectually sound at the same level of certainty one uses in making other important decisions. Second, the evidence must be clear enough to select one set of claims over another (that is, clear enough to select Christianity over other religions).

For a point of comparison Bloom considers the knowledge gained from science. He says:

Often the data are inconclusive or ambiguous preventing a rigorous conclusion. However, abandoning the research and pronouncing that no one can ever discover the answer is poor methodology. The fact is that the natural order rarely produces ideal data, and nature appears to be more far more complex the more we know about it.

Do we give up on learning about nature because the facts aren't always so clear? Likewise, we wouldn't expect to find the rich truths of our faith to be so easily searched out and set forth.

Bloom also considers the possibility that God might have good reasons for not making it all clearer.

But even if He reveals evidence of Himself only to benefit us, why isn't He more forthright about it? This much seems clear: If He made His presence or the evidence too obvious, it would interfere with His demonstration, which is intended to draw out or reveal the true inner character of mankind.

We know from several passages of Scripture that this is part of God's purpose for maintaining a relative silence. For example, in Psalm 50:21-22 we read, "These things you have done, and I kept silence; you thought that I was just like you; I will reprove you, and state the case in order before your eyes." From these statements we come to see that God is not struggling desperately to gain man's attention. Actually He is restraining Himself in order to demonstrate to human beings something about our inner character, or tendency to evil.

Finally, Bloom notes that we often don't believe evidence which is perfectly clear. In Romans 1 we read that God has made Himself known to everyone, yet many refuse to believe. Says Bloom:

Given this tendency on the part of man, how clear does the evidence have to be before people would universally recognize the existence of the God of the Bible? Would a cross in the sky actually be sufficient to convert Carl Sagan? Would the performance of an undeniable miracle in a scoffer's presence be enough? However impressive such feats would be, the records of history show that most people choose to ignore whatever evidence they have, no matter how clear it may be.

Some, for example, will insist upon starting with naturalistic presuppositions and conclude that Christianity can't be true! Atheists are adept at using this kind of reasoning. They will say, like Bertrand Russell, "Not enough evidence!" What they want is evidence which fits within the narrow confines of their naturalism. Such reductionism doesn't provide for good reasoning.

God has given plenty of evidence for His existence and for the truth of the faith. It is up to the individual to consider the evidence and respond to it.

Freudian Slip: When Christians Drop the Ball

The Jewish doctor, urged to flee Vienna during 1937 Nazi advances, is said to have replied that his “true enemy” was not the Nazis but “religion,” the Christian church. What inspired such hatred of Christianity in this scientist?

His father Jakob read the Talmud and celebrated Jewish festivals. The young boy developed a fond affection for his Hebrew Bible teacher and later said the Bible story had “an enduring effect” on his life.

A beloved nanny took him to church as a child. He came home telling his parents about “God Almighty.” But eventually the nanny was accused of theft and dismissed. He later blamed her for many of his psychological difficulties and launched his private practice on Easter Sunday as an “act of defiance.”

Anti-Semitism hounded the lad at school. Around age twelve he was horrified to learn of his father’s youthful acquiescence to Gentile bigotry. “Jew! Get off the pavement!” a “Christian” had shouted to the young Jakob after knocking his cap into the mud. The son learned to his chagrin that his dad had complied.

In high school he abandoned Judaism for secular science, humanism and Charles Darwin. At the University of Vienna he studied atheist philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach and carried his atheism into his career as a psychiatrist, distrusting the biblical documents. Religion was simply a “wish fulfillment,”

he taught, a fairy tale invented by humans to satisfy their needy souls and to avoid responsibility for their actions. The doctor was Sigmund Freud.

Freud became perhaps the most influential psychiatrist of history, affecting medicine, literature, language and culture. A recent survey of the nation's leading journalists and historians listed the top 100 news stories of this century. Prepared for the Newseum, a journalism museum in Arlington, Virginia, the poll rated Freud's 1900 publication of *Interpretation of Dreams* as number 86. He ranked higher than the U.S. entry into World War I, John Glenn's first earth orbit, the Berlin Airlift, Microsoft's founding and the Chernobyl nuclear disaster.

Obsessed with the "painful riddle of death," Freud once said he thought of it daily throughout life. His favorite grandson's death brought great grief: "Everything has lost its meaning to me... I can find no joy in life." In 1939 he slipped into eternity, a willful overdose of morphine assuaging cancer's pain.

As an adult, Freud had encountered at least a few credible Christians, notably a professor, a pastor and a physician. Perhaps by then he was too set in his ways. Suppose that instead of bigotry and presumed dishonesty, the young Freud had met still more intelligent, honest and compassionate believers who welcomed him, respected his Jewish heritage and showed God's love, who could tactfully explain the faith's rational roots and its message of forgiveness. Would psychology—and history—be different?

There are many reasons why people reject faith, including intellectual doubt, emotional confusion and anger over life situations. Nonthinking or hypocritical Christians can make matters worse. Some (many?) people who claim to be "Christians" but don't have a genuine relationship with God can do the same. Not everything done in the name of Christ is

an example of people following Jesus.

The racist or anti-Semitic hate group that quotes Scripture, the philandering minister, the abusive parent or spouse, the church leader with his hand in the till—all can breed scorn and skepticism.

Yet along with the hypocrites are many faithful followers of Jesus who feed the hungry, clothe the poor, aid disaster victims and help the hurting find comfort and spiritual life. “Christians aren’t perfect,” reads a popular bumper sticker, “just forgiven.”

These faithful seek to emulate their Leader who, according to the Bible, “committed no sin, nor was any deceit found in His mouth.” The not-so-faithful believers would do well to follow their example, seek spiritual help and clean up their acts. Then maybe some future Sigmund Freuds would warm up to the message that faith can bring true meaning and hope even in life’s most difficult circumstances.

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Christian Cliches

Conversations and Clichés

Do you ever use clichés? Do you hear them often? No doubt you can answer “Yes” to either question. But have you stopped to consider what they may mean? Christians often use clichés among themselves and even with non-Christians, but there may be a need to give thought to the meanings of these oft-repeated phrases. That is the intent of this essay. We will investigate what is behind the “Christian clichés” that tend

to become so much a part of our conversations.

Let's begin by considering a dictionary definition of the word *cliché*. A cliché is a "trite, stereotyped expression; a sentence or phrase, usually expressing a popular or common thought or idea, that has lost originality, ingenuity, and impact by long overuse."¹

My ministry has put me in touch with Christians all over this country. As I engage in conversation with these Christians, invariably I will hear language about Christian things that has become "stereotyped" and has "lost impact by long overuse." This doesn't mean there isn't truth contained in the clichés. Indeed, often there is truth of great importance for Christian theology and life. The problem is that frequently we use these clichés while thinking we know what we are saying. But do we? Could we explain these phrases if someone were to ask us to define them? My experience is that Christians have difficulty when asked to explain themselves.

Let's listen to the following conversation and hear how a Christian named Tom responds to questions from a non-believer named Sam.

Tom: Hi, Sam!

Sam: Hello, Tom. Remember when you were talking to Jim yesterday?

Tom: You mean before the sales meeting?

Sam: Yeah. I hope you aren't offended, but I was listening to

your conversation.

Tom: Oh, that's okay. We weren't having a private conversation. We were just sharing our beliefs.

Sam: Well, I'm curious about some of the things you discussed.

Tom: Like what?

Sam: Like when you said you have Jesus in your heart. Were you referring to the Prophet who lived so long ago? If so, how can you possibly have Him in your heart?

Tom: Well, yes, I was referring to the Jesus of long ago. But He is alive now, and He has saved me.

Sam: What do you mean, He's alive now? That's not possible. And what do you mean when you say He saved you? These are weird ideas.

Tom: I guess they sound weird, but they really aren't. You see, Jesus rose from the dead, ascended into heaven, and His spirit lives in me.

Sam: Tom, I don't mean to be rude, but such things sound ludicrous to me. Hey, my phone's ringing and I'm expecting an

important call. Maybe we can talk again later.

Sam asked some good questions. They deserved answers. But was Tom able to explain himself? He had a difficult time, didn't he? For example, the phrase, "I have Jesus in my heart" had become a cliché for Tom. He was able to converse with a fellow Christian with the assumption that they understood one another. But it was a different matter when a non-Christian expressed his curiosity about the conversation he had heard the previous day.

I have Jesus in my heart is one of several clichés we will consider. The goal of this article is to motivate Christians to give attention to our conversations and see if you find clichés lurking there.

I Have Jesus in My Heart

Why are you a Christian? How do you answer that question? In my experience many people have responded by stating that they have *Jesus in their heart*. As important as this response may be, too often it is a cliché that belies its meaning. The Christian who acknowledges the importance of thinking through his beliefs will want to consider its implications for those who hear him. After all, the one who hears has every right to ask what such a statement might mean.

In the third chapter of Paul's Ephesian letter he prayed that his readers would "be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man; so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith . . ." (Eph. 3:16-17, NASB). Galatians 2 contains one of the most powerful expressions of the indwelling Christ in Paul's life. Paul wrote, "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me . . ." (Gal. 2:20, NASB). In his second

letter to the Corinthians Paul asks, "do you not recognize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?" (2 Cor. 13:5, NASB). These passages, and many more, serve to show that the New Testament affirms that Jesus indwells His followers. Thus it is important to stress that when someone says *I have Jesus in my heart* it has biblical merit. A problem arises, though, when we use this expression without attention to its profound message. When this happens we are using a cliché.

So how can we go beyond the cliché in order to describe its significance in our lives? The first point of reference centers on the fact that Christians are Trinitarian, not Unitarian. We believe God exists in three persons: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. This is a difficult doctrine to understand and share, but it must be upheld if one is using the Bible as the guide for beliefs. If God exists in three persons, and one of those persons is Jesus, God the Son, then we can better understand *Jesus in my heart* by observing that there is a unity between Jesus and the Holy Spirit. For example, in Romans 8 "the indwelling of the Spirit and the indwelling of Christ are the same thing."^{2} This doctrine permeates the writings of Paul. He asserted "that Jesus is no mere fact in history, no towering personality of the past, but a living, present Spirit, whose nature is the very nature of God."^{3} In addition, we should realize that Paul's favorite expression revolved around the phrase "in Christ." This phrase "(or some cognate expression, such as "in the Lord," "in Him," etc.) occurs 164 times in Paul."^{4} Thus we can conclude that Jesus is very much alive in the Christian's life through the Spirit.

The second point of reference concerns the word *heart*. The Bible refers to the heart of man frequently. "The heart is the focus of mind, feeling, and will; it stands for the whole personality."^{5} Jesus is to "take up residence" in our whole personality. So when a Christian says *Jesus is in my heart* there is a literal implication. Jesus resides supernaturally

in the believer through His Spirit. This is an astounding doctrine that indicates a transformed person! May our Lord lead us to continue sharing His presence in our lives by indicating that we understand truly what it means to say *I have Jesus in my heart*.

I Have Faith

Is a Christian the only person who has faith? Many Christians seem to think so. On many occasions I have played “the devil’s advocate” among Christian groups by asking them to describe and defend their beliefs. One of the most frequent responses I get is *I have faith*. When I hear this I usually retort by saying “So what? Do you think that because you are a Christian you are given sole ownership of the idea?” After this I encourage them to think about the implications of the phrase. It is much more than a cliché.

All people, Christians and non-Christians, even atheists, exercise faith. That is, each day of our lives we apply faith in simple and profound ways. For example, you may take a pill of some kind today. That requires faith that the pill will help you rather than hurt you. If you travel on an airplane, that requires faith that you will arrive safely at your intended destination. Usually you don’t even see the pilots until you have landed. These are everyday illustrations of faith. But just what does this word mean?

A major dictionary provides us with intriguing definitions. The first entry states that faith is “confidence or trust in a person or thing.” The second entry says faith is “belief which is not based on proof.” And then in the eighth entry the dictionary declares faith is “trust in God and in His promises as made through Christ by which man is justified or saved.”{6} Obviously the eighth entry comes closest to a Christian understanding of faith. The first entry is also important to a Christian because it includes the idea of trust in a person. But it is the second entry that causes the most problem among

Christians. Too many Christians use *I have faith* to mean they believe in something that is not based on proof. Unfortunately, this is when the phrase becomes a cliché.

For over 100 years, naturalism has been the dominant worldview in our culture. Among other things, this worldview bows at the altar of modern science to the extent that many believe that nothing can be true until it can be proven scientifically. Many Christians have been highly influenced by this concept. Thus they tend to say *I have faith* when they can't "prove" their beliefs in a scientific manner. This reaction is not legitimate within a Christian worldview. It is important to realize that even an atheistic scientist takes faith into the laboratory. There are facets of his own life that cannot be "proven" scientifically. If he is married, he may say he loves his wife. Can that be proven scientifically?

The key word in discussing faith is *in*, a small but crucial preposition for all people. Remember, the first dictionary definition we quoted said that faith includes the idea of "trust *in* a person or thing" (emphasis added). Hebrews 11:1, perhaps the most succinct definition of faith in the Bible, states that "faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." When we read the rest of chapter 11 we realize that *assurance* and *conviction* are words that are alive. They refer to the reality of the living God in the lives of those who put faith *in* His reality. God was already "proven" to them. He was to be trusted with their very lives.

The same is true for one who claims to be a Christian in our day. When we say we have faith, we should continue by declaring faith *in* the living God.

I'm Saved!

When you say *I'm saved!*, have you ever considered what someone may be thinking? People who hear you may have a number of

questions. For example, they may ask why you are speaking in present tense. If you are saved now, does that mean you were actually saved at some point in the past? If so, does the present connect with the past in some way? Or they may want to know why you needed to be saved in the first place. Were you drowning and someone rescued you? Maybe they would even like to know if you are saved *for* something or someone. Proclaiming *I'm saved!* can be a strange expression if it is not explained. If someone asks for an explanation and we can't respond, we may be guilty of using a cliché. We think we know what we mean, and our fellow Christians may think they know what is meant, but a lack of articulation implies a lack of understanding.

Salvation, of course, permeates the Bible. And innumerable volumes have been written about what the Scriptures tell us about this crucial doctrine. For our purposes the clearest emphases are centered on the person of Jesus, the Savior. When we say *I'm saved!* we imply that Jesus is at the center of salvation.

Before Jesus was born, an angel told Joseph the shocking news that Mary was carrying the center of salvation. "And she will bear a Son; and you shall call His name Jesus, for it is He who will save His people from their sins" (Matt. 1:21, NASB). Take note of the last portion of this verse. It states that *Jesus will save*, and that He will save *from* sins. When Jesus was an infant, Mary and Joseph took Him to the temple for the Jewish rites of redemption of the firstborn, and the purification of his mother. . . ."⁷ While there, they were approached by a righteous and devout man named Simeon who took Jesus into his arms and declared to God that he was now ready to die, "For my eyes have seen Thy salvation" (Luke 2:30, NASB). Another amazing declaration! Mary and Joseph's son was being called God's salvation. During His earthly ministry Jesus asserted many things about Himself, including this famous proclamation: "I am the door; if anyone enters

through Me, he shall be saved, and shall go in and out, and find pasture" (John 10:9, NASB). Because Jesus is the door, there is a present reality concerning salvation that applies to those who enter through the door.

Through these and numerous other verses we have a more complete picture of what *I'm saved!* entails. But there is a crucial question leaping from such passages. If sin creates the need for salvation, then what is it? To put it simply, when the Christian proclaims *I'm saved!* his hearers should understand that ". . . sin is not only an act of wrongdoing but a state of alienation from God"^{8} affecting everyone (Rom. 3:23). This is a crucial concept in contemporary culture that is generally misunderstood and rejected. In addition, such alienation from God cannot be rectified by "rightdoing." It can only be rectified through Jesus' sacrificial payment for sin on the cross. I'm saved because of what Jesus did for me. In an amazing, life-changing way an event of the past brings salvation into the present. Praise God, we have been saved! Now we can live knowing salvation is in the present.

What Would Jesus Do?

What Would Jesus Do? is a question that can be seen and heard virtually everywhere in the evangelical Christian community. "The slogan has appeared on coffee mugs, lapel pins, paperweights, and a host of other knickknacks. There are now devotionals, Bibles, books and CDs based on WWJD."^{9} With all of this exposure, does the phrase still have meaning? Or has it become a cliché without proper impact? Or does it carry the correct content in the first place? Lets consider what the expression tells us.

One of the more positive aspects of *What Would Jesus Do?* is that it can serve as a simple reminder of the Christian's moral life. Surely each Christian has a perspective of Jesus that includes the moral perfection that permeated His earthly life. There is no greater model to emulate than Jesus. The

writer of Hebrews tells us that Jesus was “tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin” (Heb. 4:15, NASB). The same writer tells us He “offered Himself without blemish to God . . .” (Heb. 9:14, NASB). Jesus was and is the only one who could make such an unblemished offering. So asking *What Would Jesus Do?*, whether audibly or inaudibly, can awaken us to our need for a moral model.

But can we always know what Jesus would do in all circumstances? Perhaps it would be more accurate to ask *What did Jesus do?* in certain circumstances. Through a study of the gospels of the New Testament we can learn exactly how Jesus acted and reacted to specific challenges He faced. For example, He was faced with “moral conflicts between obedience toward parents and God (Luke 2), Sabbath regulations and healing (Mark 2), and government and God (Matt. 22).”{10} More importantly, on the cross “he was squeezed between the demands of justice for the innocent (himself) and mercy for mankind (the guilty). This conflict was without question the greatest ever faced by man. . . .”{11} These examples usually have entered our consciousness to the point that they ring in our minds like bells tolling the truth. It is as if we would not have expected Jesus to have done or said anything other than what we know from the gospels.

Were Jesus’ disciples ever surprised, if not shocked, by what Jesus did? Of course we know they often were stunned as they watched and heard Jesus do and say unusual things. The words *amazed* and *astonished* are found frequently in the Gospels. The story of the rich young ruler, for example, relates the disciples’ reaction after hearing Jesus’ teaching. He said, “How hard it will be for those who are wealthy to enter the kingdom of God!” (Mark 10:23, NASB). And the disciples were “amazed” at His words. Jesus continued by stating, “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.” And they were “even more astonished” and said to Him, “Then who can be saved?”

(Mark 10:23-26, NASB).

The actions and words of Jesus and the reactions of the disciples remind us of the deity of Jesus. Think of this in present time. If Jesus physically walked beside you, would you always know what He was about to do? "Jesus is unique in his identity as the incarnate Son of God, and we should not assume that we could do or should do everything he did." {12} Thus, caution is urged when we assume we always know what Jesus *would* do while we affirm what Jesus *did* do.

Notes

1. The Random House Dictionary of the English Language, 1967.
2. Lewis B. Smedes, *Union with Christ*, revised ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1983), 114.
3. James Stewart, *A Man in Christ* (New York: Harper & Row, n.d.; reprint ed., Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1984), 154.
4. Ibid., 155.
5. A. Skevington Wood, "Ephesians," in *The Expositors Bible Commentary*, vol. 11, gen. ed. Frank E. Gaebeline (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan/Regency, 1978), 51.
6. The Random House Dictionary.
7. Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1969), 194.
8. Donald G. Bloesch, "Sin," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1984).
9. Albert Hsu, "What Would Jesus Do About WWJD?", *re:generation quarterly* (Winter, 1998/99), 6.
10. Norman L. Geisler, *Christian Ethics: Options and Issues* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1989), 125.
11. Ibid.
12. Hsu, "What Would Jesus Do About "WWJD", 6.

