



Worried About Your Witness?

In the movie *Ben-Hur*, the Roman villain is asked, “How do you fight an idea?” He replies, “With another idea.” Some of the most spiritually lethal ideas are expressed in religious terminology and clothed in religious tradition.

If Christ-centered religion is to be an accurate representation of the mind of Christ, it always needs continual examination and it often needs rigorous restorations and reformation. Bankrupt religious ideas need to be fought with Christ-centered ideas. Cherished traditions that accumulate over the years, like barnacles on a boat, can become religious sacred cows and need to come under scrutiny and careful critique at the hands of biblically-sound, grace-based ideas.

Witnessing

One of the most fascinating innovations within Christendom is a practice generically called *witnessing*. This tradition does not flourish in all parts of the body of Christ as it seems to require a specific religious environment as its fertile ground. The basic idea of *witnessing* (that many believe to be a mandatory protocol of being a Christian) springs from Jesus’ statement to his disciples in one of his post-resurrection appearances. He told them that they were his *witnesses* (Luke 24:48).

Evangelism (a presentation of Christian faith that is intended to bring others to a relationship with God and thus to salvation) is another term that is often used when speaking of sharing our Christian faith. *Evangelism* and *evangelist* convey the meaning of announcing and proclaiming good news.

Witnessing, as it was used in the time of Jesus, and of course still is, is a word from the world of law. A *witness* is an individual who is an eye-witness before a court of law or that of public opinion, and thus is deemed reliable. A *witness* gives his or her *testimony*, yet another word religion has borrowed from the world of jurisprudence.

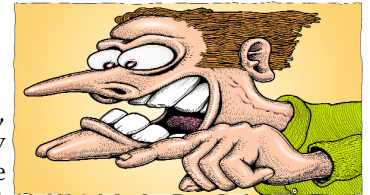
There is no doubt, of course, that only those who were alive to see and know Jesus, to experience his life, death, burial and resurrection, were true *witnesses*. And their testimony is, of course, invaluable. They were able to give expert *testimony*. The record of what they did as a result of what they saw, heard and touched is an invaluable part of understanding historical Christianity.

Of course, Jesus is alive, and we experience him now—but we were not and are not eye-witnesses. At best we are a different kind of *witness*. The basic idea of *witnessing* as taught by some Christians is that 1) every Christian is a *witness* and 2) every Christian must *witness*. The idea is that evangelism is a command of Jesus that applies to us, and we must personally tell others about what we believe.

Questions About Personal Evangelism/Witnessing

Witnessing, within some churches and movements, can become a quota. Members are encouraged/exhorted to meet their quota, as suggested or mandated by their religious leader, on a daily or weekly basis. This need to meet a quota becomes a contrived religious rule. If a quota is not met, or if someone refuses to *evangelize*, then at the very least their commitment to their specific church is in question, if not their commitment to Jesus Christ.

Guilt and shame are thus part of *witnessing*, for the motivation is that God will be happier with us if we just do more. This is, obviously, contra-gospel—it is not good news, but instead is blatantly legalistic. Jesus never suggested that God would be



I don't believe that I am the only way, the only method, that God has of reaching people with the gospel—and if I fail, then the screams in hell will only intensify.

It is possible to have wrong notions and ideas about Christianity. It is possible that religion can take opinions and ideas that have never risen to the level of core teachings of historic Christianity and turn them into dogma.



happier with us after our performance of religious stuff.

- *Personal evangelism* and *witnessing*, as described above, is not practiced by the majority of Christians in the world today—nor has it ever in historic Christianity. Anglicans, Lutherans, Episcopalians, Catholics, Russian/Greek/Armenian Orthodox, United Methodist, Quaker/Friends to name a few do not suggest that failure to *witness* turns one into an inferior Christian, or at worst, gives *testimony* to the fact that one is not a Christian at all. It must also be said that *witnessing* is also a practice that some cultic movements have refined into a highly successful recruiting tool, though their *witnessing* is about “another gospel” (Galatians 1:6-7).

- *Personal evangelism* and *witnessing* can become code words for religious sales and marketing, directly related to church growth. Some churches do not instruct and urge members merely to bring people to Christ, but naturally, to bring new members to themselves—the legal entity that functions as a church.

The *evangelistic* terminology favored by some illustrates that people can be reduced to objects in the drive to grow a church. Some speak of others who do not believe as they do as a “mission-field”—that is, a target to be overcome and won.

For those who believe in the religious marketing concept of *witnessing*, it is not enough that people in their neighborhood or town might

be evangelized by a Lutheran or Methodist church. When the rubber meets the road, *witnessing* and *personal evangelism* mean more people sitting in our church. These techniques can easily become nothing more than multi-level marketing concepts used to grow a church.

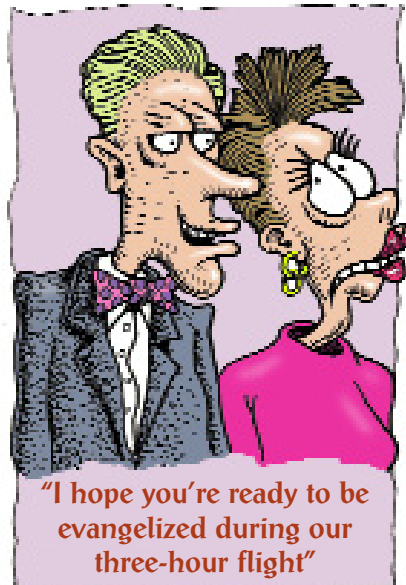
In order to sell people on a specific church, as opposed to mere Christianity, we must not simply tell people about Jesus, but essentially, and eventually, tell people why our particular church is better than the church down the street. This need to “close the deal” can lead to exaggerated truth claims, implications and assertions that our church is better than one down the street.

Exaggerated truth claims amount to skating on thin ice, for one of the central essentials of the historic Christian faith is the unity of be-

As we share our faith we must win the right to be heard. Among other things, that means that others must first see the Christ-centered sermon that is being lived in our lives before they hear us preach one.

lievers, the belief that the body of Christ is universal and no one church has a market on God. No one church can put God in a box. No one church has the exclusive earthly franchise to market him.

- *Personal evangelism* and *witnessing* are almost always directly



related to energetic and emphatic teaching about a physical, literal hell-fire in which people are tortured for eternity. Hell is one of the fear-based appeals of *evangelism*—the idea being to scare people out of hell by scaring the hell out of them! The would-be evangelist is convinced that his or her *testimony* and/or effectiveness at *witnessing* may determine the eternal fate of people they meet. All of this can be far from simply telling people about the wonderful and marvelous gospel of Jesus Christ.

I absolutely and categorically reject the religious innovation that holds a “lazy evangelist” responsible for someone burning forever in hell fire. The one-two punch of *witnessing* and hell is a superstitious big stick that religion has appropriated to itself.

If I am on an airplane, and if I become involved in a conversation with the person sitting next to me—great. If that conversation eventually becomes a conversation about God—even better. But if I listen and believe the force of much teaching and preaching about *witnessing* and *evangelism* I will worry and stew as I prepare to board the plane, concerned that I might fail in my mission if I can’t *witness* to the person sitting next to me.

Does God want me to force my *testimony* on the person next to me if they would rather listen to music

on a headset or read a book? If they prefer to sleep, do I need to find a contrivance to wake them up from their nap, or keep them from taking one, so that I can *witness*, fill my quota, wow my Christian peers next time I see them with my *witnessing* trophies—and of course keep God happy with me?

Ideas That Turn Into Dogma

It is possible to have wrong notions and ideas about Christianity. It is possible that religion can take opinions and ideas that have never risen to the level of core teachings of historic Christianity and turn them into dogma.

There is nothing wrong with a Christian sharing their faith. There is certainly nothing wrong with a Christian talking about the gospel with someone, especially someone with whom they already enjoy a

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relationship (relational evangelism).

But there are serious biblical objections about confronting, arguing and offensively combating strangers (confrontational evangelism), attempting to get them to attend a specific church (see Matthew 23:15 and 2 Timothy 2:14-15). There is absolutely no doubt that there is nothing Christian at all about enforcing *evangelism* as an absolute requirement of being a Christian.

If we don't *witness* to people will they go to hell? If my *witness* is inferior, or if I get lazy and backslide (another in-house term) on my next plane trip will the person seated next to me (perhaps because they are too tired or disinterested to listen, or perhaps because I am a slacker of an evangelist) go to hell? I believe those who suggest such a thing are actually manipulating the gospel and twisting the Bible.

I don't believe in placing unbiblical burdens on people in the name of getting more people to attend a particular church. I don't



believe that I am the only way, the only method, that God has of reaching people with the gospel—and if I fail, then the screams in hell will only intensify.

Sharing Our Faith

I believe that we are all, as Christians, living sacrifices, and that God will use us and allow us to be used in his service in letting others know about the gospel of Jesus Christ. Sometimes we might not even have to say anything. Sometimes we might assist others to say something. Sometimes we might merely be a light, as Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:14-16)—a metaphor that reminds us that lights are

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notoriously quiet while being appreciated by one and all.

Ideas are like children—no matter how much you may like other people's, you can't help but think that yours are the best. Consider this thought—the degree to which you are entrapped and enveloped

and even imprisoned by religious thinking, on this or any other issue, is the degree of pain you will feel when you come into contact with a conflicting, biblically-based, Christ-centered idea that you can't find an adequate reason to dismiss. The pain will usually continue until you find an acceptable (or even unacceptable!) way to deal with the offensive idea.

It is our privilege and pleasure to tell others about the personal relationship we enjoy with God—a relationship he freely offers to all humanity. But there is hope beyond our efforts to share our faith, no matter what method we choose. That is, after all, the message of the gospel. Grace, not works. Many seem to make *evangelism* into an exclusively human enterprise, a requirement God expects of us in order that he will be more pleased

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with us and love us more than he would have otherwise.

As we share our faith we must win the right to be heard. Among other things, that means that others must first see the Christ-centered sermon that is being lived in our lives before they hear us preach one. Confronting strangers (being combative, argumentative, rude and obnoxious) accomplishes nothing.

1 Peter 3:15 tells us to "always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you...." This passage says to *answer those who ask*, not to inflict argument and condemnation on those who are not interested.

God allows each of us to be of use in his service, and he calls us to serve others, to be a light, to let others know, in some way, about the gospel of Jesus Christ. But God does not depend on how well we tell others about him to determine whether they (or indeed ourselves) will be saved. Thank God for that. □

—Greg Albrecht