



- Short articles to encourage important conversations -

We won't know until we ask

The word 'gospel' means 'good news – and good news is exactly what the core Christian message is! Instead of leaving us to the natural fate of our wrong-doing, God intervened. Because of love, God came in Christ Jesus – who took the punishment we deserved, and showed us a better way. We can be restored to relationship with God as a result – as well as to the purpose God has for us each on this planet, and eternity with him beyond!

The Great Commission of Matthew 28:18-20 makes our mission as God's people clear. We are to 'make disciples' of people from all nations who are not yet disciples. We do this by sharing the good news, and then by helping them understand and follow Jesus' teachings. This is the mission not only of every church – and every individual, but also of any other gathering of Christians, irrespective of how big or small that is, or where. This includes church small groups, Christians praying in a workplace and students praying in a school. We are the Church, and this is our mission!

However, it's not an easy mission! 2 Corinthians 4:4 explains how, 'The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers so they cannot see the light of the gospel...'. People's thinking can become so blinded that they are genuinely unable to understand the gospel. Even if we share this message clearly, people can walk away unaffected. What are we to do?





The only way to unblock a person's mind is to engage with the blockage through both prayer and conversation. However, life is busy. Getting distracted from, or ignoring, this mission is easy to do. The answer is love!

We're told in Matthew 9 that when Jesus saw the crowds, "*...he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.*" Jesus saw their spiritual state, and compassion moved him to act. Jesus left the comfort of heaven, came to earth, engaged with the brokenness of humanity, and then died on the cross. It's that same compassion that can motivate us too!

So, who will you reach out to, and what questions could you ask? Every effort is needed, and we won't know until we ask!



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Sharing the gospel in 30 seconds

A great way to summarise the gospel (good news) is to remember the four words: Creation, Fall, Jesus, Restoration. If you are ever asked what Christians believe, with a quick explanation of each of these words you can share the core Christian message in about 30 seconds! For example:

1. CREATION – God created us and this world, and he made everything perfect.
2. FALL – But we were separated from God when we used the free will God gave us to do things that are wrong and selfish, choosing to go our own way.
3. JESUS – But God loved us and so he had a rescue plan. Through what Jesus did at the cross (in his death and resurrection) we can be forgiven.
4. RESTORATION – As a result we are restored to friendship with God, to his purposes for us in this life, and to eternity with him forever!

A good 30 second radio ad is about 75 to 85 words. The short message above is 93 words, and contains the ore of what is a very simple, but also very important, message!





To clarify a couple of things, explaining what Jesus did for us is the centre of this message. You could even say it is the message! The other 3 points give the context. For example, God's existence as the creator is important to mention and discuss – because many people don't believe in God. Taking about how our wrongdoing has damaged our relationship with God is important too – because we don't need a 'Saviour' if we don't first have a problem.

Additionally, the way a story is told is about more than the words. It includes what is implied! What does the person listening hear you say? There must be no doubt left from our tone and emphasis that *love* is what is motivating God (John 3:16) – not a desire to condemn people for their wrong-doing (John 3:17). While our 'sin' needs explaining – it is the context for the message, not the message!

How about practicing explaining the Christian message of hope in about 30 seconds with a friend? It's a useful skill – and an important message!



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How to get a conversation started

Many Christians really want to say things that will help their friends and family understand how impacting and real a connection with God can be. However, for those who do not yet have this experience and belief, this idea can seem a million miles from their minds. How do you start a conversation?

The key to great conversations is great questions. A question based approach is important in our culture too, because many have rejected the idea of religious truth – and it's logically impossible to tell the truth to someone who doesn't believe truth exists! However, you can ask them a question! Setting us an example, Jesus also asked a lot of questions. In fact, it would be fair to say that his 'method' for personal witness was to ask questions with an ear open to the Spirit. So, how about we learn to do the same?

To help you get started, here are three really great questions that you could memorise – to try out in all sorts of conversations.

Question 1: What do you mean by that?

The moment someone says something that you don't feel you agree with, instead of disagreeing ask this question. It clarifies what they're saying, and buys you time to think.

Question 2: Where did you get that idea from?

This question clarifies why a person believes something - which is important because our assumptions can be incorrect.





Question 3: Have you considered...? Or, Are you aware that...?

This third question then brings some substance from you to the conversation. This is you stating why you think differently, sharing a new idea with them, but you've wisely worded it as a question, to invite their thoughts on it.

For example, someone says all religions are essentially the same. What do you mean the same? Maybe they say all religions say to love others. Where did you get the idea from? It's likely they don't know – but whatever they say you could highlight what you understand. For example, Are you aware that the world's major religions are actually majorly different in the major things? For example, some say God exists and some say he doesn't. How is that the same?

The key to great conversations is great questions, and conversations can change lives!

How about memorising these three questions, and then trying them out in a conversation this week?



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The power of prayer

If we were to summarise Jesus' approach to personal witness it would be fair to say he asked questions, with an ear open to the Spirit. There was no one approach or method. Every conversation was different because every person was different. As a result, his was a conversational approach, while involving prayer and an openness to the leading of God's Spirit.

Prayer and results

I recall a friend, Catherine, who saw 10 relatives come to faith over a 10 year period. She did not have the gift of the gab – but she did invite them all to various outreach events and programmes. However, the main thing she did was pray. As we pray, God works!

Prayer and opportunities

Early in my teenage years I was taught to pray for opportunities – and it's amazing how often they come along as a result. In Matthew 9 Jesus explains that he is the Lord of the harvest. God 'choreographs' the circumstances of our lives – and of others' lives. There are probably many things in our lives that we considered to be coincidences, that we'll one day discover to have been God-incidences!

Prayer and leading

But God can do a lot more than just opening up an opportunity. As we engage people in conversation God can lead us by His Spirit – like he did with Jesus. For example, when talking to the Samaritan woman at the well



(John 4) Jesus had a revelation that she had been married five times before, and that the man she was now with was not her husband. This word of knowledge turned the conversation around. The same can happen for us. Sometimes we might think to ask a particular question – and it could be God prompting us to do this. A Christian friend told me he stopped his car to talk to a guy walking beside the road one day because he felt God was prompting him to do this. The man rejected two attempts at a conversation – but on the third question the man opened up. It turned out he'd been literally on the way to end his life, and that his life was saved as a result!

Through small quiet promptings God can lead us. Let's believe this, and step out!



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Disciples, not converts

Many church people have been at outreach events where people seemed to respond to a gospel message, but then weren't interested in meeting to discuss their supposed 'decision' afterwards. What are we to make of this?

I'd suggest that a key part of the solution is to recognise the importance of this thing called conversation.

As a possible definition, and to provoke some thought, what do you think of this statement? *Discipleship is about continued conversations with interested people with the teachings of Jesus in mind.* Let's unpack it.

1. We disciple interested people, not just converts

It is commonly said these days that we should 'disciple toward conversion, not after conversion'. This is because of a recognised pattern in human behaviour. Many are choosing to belong to a Christian group before they choose to believe in the Christian message. We might therefore be more effective if we initiating 'discipleship conversations' with interested people more often, rather than waiting for confirmed 'converts'!

2. We continued conversations only because they already exist

The idea here is that, if you try to only start a conversation about spiritual things with someone after their 'decision' that might feel weird. In contrast, if you had been discussing spiritual things with them prior – continuing that conversation after their 'decision' would be natural! This





is a key reason many new believers don't attend 'discipleship classes'. They can't work out what we're doing. By engaging people in normal spiritual conversations when they are non-believers we set a pattern. Could it be that we've been so focused on making converts that we've forgotten how to engage a conversation?

3. We engage through conversation – not 'teaching'

Jesus taught through asking questions, while making reference to things happening around them. Somehow, we've got this idea that people need to sit and learn from the wise ones. But that feels weird for many new Christians these days. They want life and reality, authenticity and relationship - not just information and truth statements. The method for our discipleship should be the same as for our witness. We engage conversations!

What would happen if, instead of trying to plug a person into a programme, we just asked them questions with the teachings of Jesus in mind? A conversation is usually no further away than some great questions – and if we put a drink or meal on the table in front of us, the that conversation might even go from 'good' to 'great'!



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People-centred discipleship

It's a time-tested reality in many Western churches that only a few who respond to a preached gospel message one week will come to a discipleship class the next – while nearly all would happily meet the friend who invited them for a coffee. What if we approached discipleship differently – and met for coffee?

(i) Start with food – or coffee.

A key aspect of the 'weirdness' of some Christian discipleship is in the way we reduce it to a programme. A person makes a decision to follow Jesus – and suddenly they are expected to be happy sitting in a 'classroom' being told what to think. What if we aimed for a coffee in a kitchen or café as an alternative starting point?

(ii) Show care first

Another error we sometimes make is to think new people attending a gathering are now ready to hear all our teachings. Remember, 'People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care!' With this in view, it could be wise to give as much as half of your meeting time each week with a new believer to finding out how they are going!

(iii) Discuss their spiritual questions before ours

While prayerfully preparing some thoughts and questions to discuss is important, we will get a lot more traction if our conversations are based around the other person's questions. It's about 'scratching where it itches'. The priority



in the first few weeks of meeting with someone is to establishing an environment of trust. Sometimes it will take 4 or 5 'coffees' with a person before things really open up. For a context, most people who attend a discipleship course drop out before the fifth session.

(iv) Only then discuss what you have prepared

With the above groundwork laid, we can then deliver what we've prepared – but through questions. Discipleship needs a content. The Great Commission of Matthew 28 tells us we are to 'teach people to obey Jesus' teachings.' This doesn't have to be complicated either. For example, to disciple someone you could both agree to read through the Gospel of Luke at home, and then meeting to discuss what you've read.

In summary, it's often been said that programmes don't reach people – it takes people to reach people. The same applies here. Programmes don't disciple people – it takes people to disciple people!

Be one of those people. Invite someone for coffee!



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Why Christianity is good news – not bad! (Part I)

Christianity has a branding problem in the West. To speak positively first, Christianity has arguably brought more good to this planet than any other thing, and transforms lives for good consistently – and also in way nothing else does. A current change is that our public profile is currently determined by what public say, and they are speaking as if our religion were a problem. What is the way forward?

The conclusion is that we need to take responsibility, and begin finding new ways to tell our own story with our own mouths. Some would suggest we need to do good deeds – but the challenge is, in reality the Christian Church actually is already doing that! Our actions actually do represent us well. Public media do not want to tell our story for us anymore. That is what changed – and we didn't respond! Because we have not innovated to find new way to get our story heard we have, by default, left public media as our only public voice. It is time to find new ways to tell our own story!

Very few are positioned to tell stories on platforms that reach many – but such people do exist and they could participate in helping positive stories be heard, This can subtly affect the perspectives of many. However, all of us can tell a positive story in a conversation. Some get to speak to small groups at work and in other places occasionally too. The inclusion of a small positive story can have a subtle effect there too. If a few hundred thousand Christians were to start telling positive stories like ths, it has the potential to gradually affect public perspective!

A landmark study by Richard Freeman of Harvard found that young people who are active in church are more likely to finish



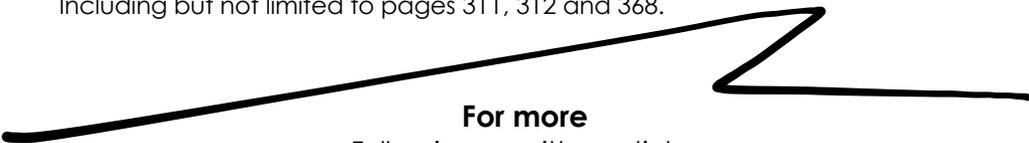


school, avoid out-of-wedlock pregnancies, keep a job and stay out of trouble with the law. In terms of preventing crime, some studies have even found that church attendance has more of an impact than family structure. So, while growing up in a fatherless home can have a negative effect – mere church attendance has been shown to be able to counter this. For prisoners and drug addicts, faith-based approaches to helping people break free from addictions consistently succeed at a higher level than others. Regular attendance at a Prison Fellowship Bible study has been shown to cut reoffending by two-thirds. People with higher levels of religious commitment have lower levels of depression and stress. Those who attend church are 4 times less likely to commit suicide. In addition, their marriages have a better chance of staying together, they are about five times more generous to charity and two times as generous volunteering. Put all this together and they end up having less health problems, and they live longer!*

In case we're not getting the point – these things really are good news – and we haven't even started discussing the positive effects of this faith societies yet!

Good news is for sharing. This faith is good news! Learn the stories and tell the stories, because if we all do this, it will make a difference!

* Many statistics cited are from *How Now Then Shall We Live*, by Chuck Colson. Including but not limited to pages 311, 312 and 368.



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Why Christianity is good news – not bad! (Part II)

While this faith has arguably brought more good to this planet than any other thing, it is consistently represented in a bad light by media. In business and marketing language, this is called a 'branding' problem. Additionally, because the positive stories of what we do are so rarely told by public media, the public don't know about the good things we're doing. This has left the Christian Church with a significant 'branding' problem. What is the way forward? We're going to have to learn how to tell our own story!

Christianity is known to transform societies for good and in a way that is truly unique. For example, without Christianity our society wouldn't be as charitable as it is. To illustrate this, one secular historian noted that he couldn't find a single example of a charitable organisation existing to help the poor prior to Christ – while in New Zealand alone today we have more than 25,000 charitable organisations! The reason for this is Christianity, and the way it has shaped our entire cultural way of thinking, even for those who don't believe the faith itself!

Prior to Christ there were no hospitals to help the poor and needy – while after him, and specifically because of him, they came about. The reason behind why we give education to poor people is exactly the same. The only reason the slave trade was stopped in England was because of initiatives of followers of Jesus. Our belief in the equality of races comes specifically from our belief system,





as does our belief in the equality of women and men. The women's rights movement started as a specifically Christian movement. Over time that the values were embraced by our wider society. Our freedoms of speech and religion, our ideas related to human rights and much more do too.

It is true that terrible things that have happened in the name of God's church. Corrupted leaders have abused power - like in the Crusades or Inquisitions. However, an honest assessment reveals that the real problem wasn't Christianity. The problem was instead that these leaders weren't Christian enough! A quick look at Jesus' teachings shows this – as do the writings of a growing number of secular historians. Christianity is good news!

While our good works and prayers are vital, we also need to use our words.

Public media aren't going to tell our story for us anymore.

We need to become proactive in telling our own stories!



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Conversations move at the speed of trust

A few years ago I was teaching our boys how to ride their bicycles, and 'three things ye must know': How to pedal, how to balance and turn, and how to brake. They reached a point where they felt they'd learnt these, so we went for a 10km ride around an estuary.

At one point you need to ride up behind a Petrol Station, and then down a slight incline and back onto the footpath. As I rolled down the slight incline, I gently applied the brakes. Boy #1 rode into my back tyre and fell off his bike. Boy #2 masterfully swerved, missing me entirely – but then ran right over his brother and fell off. I had two sad boys with bloodied knees. What went wrong? I'd taught them how to pedal, balance and turn, and brake. So, why hadn't they braked? *Because braking was irrelevant to them until they first knew how to ride!*

A similar dynamic is sometimes at play in our outreach training. We teach people how to communicate the Christian message when they haven't yet worked out how to get into non-threatening, two way conversation on spiritual things! And this is why learning conversational skills is important.

Great conversation begin with great questions. For example, What's the best holiday you ever had? What's

one of the most



exciting jobs



you've ever had? Questions like this get conversations going – and while these might seem trivial they are important because they develop trust. Trust determines what we can and cannot talk about with a person!

A key factor that builds trust is the things we discover we have in common with others. This is a natural process, and it happens as we take a selfless interest in others. For example: Where do you come from? Tell me about your family? What do you do with your time? What do you do for recreation?*

The point is this: Big talk follows small talk! For an example, consider Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan woman, which began with some humorous 'small talk' related to getting water. If we want more 'big talk', the key is sometimes in mastering our 'small talk'!

So, how about practicing your 'small talk' this week by taking a selfless interest in others while trying out a few new and interesting questions? You might quickly be encouraged by what happens - because conversations really do move at the speed of trust!

* Caleb Leadership Ministries in New Zealand runs a training course on this very topic.



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How to start a NORMAL conversation

Many Christians struggle to discuss their faith with others. Here is a strange tip which we know to have helped many people address this struggle. To help conversations on spiritual things get started it can ironically be useful to remove the agenda of sharing the gospel initially!

It sounds crazy to some at first, but the logic is worth contemplating. The reason spiritual conversations are difficult for some people is because they are aware that we're trying to 'sell' something to someone who might not want to hear it. It's like we're trying to share our 'version of the truth' with someone who thinks differently. Doing this can break some unwritten but very real 'rules' of conversation. By removing our agendas we make room for what is rightly called a NORMAL conversation within which two people ask questions and express views. These conversations potentially change lives!

Step 1 – Take an interest in what people think and believe

The idea here is to ask questions without the intent to change the other person, or convince them of anything. These are 'innocent' and honest questions. Asking questions like this builds trust in a way that talking never can. Also, by asking about another person's views, and the reasons for them, we can learn new things about them. This can position us to engage a more meaningful conversation!

Step 2 - Ask a few more sincere questions

The temptation for some is to say too much too early in the conversation. Eager to say something meaningful, we maybe forget some basic skills of conversation. As a tip, only speak briefly when asked a first question – and always throw a question





straight back at the other person to better understand their thoughts! Conversations move at the speed of trust – and this approach helps trust and understanding to develop.

Step 3 – When you do share, be brief, and talk personally

Because 'questions beg questions', opportunities will naturally arise in these kinds of conversations. *It is then entirely appropriate to share your own thoughts.* However, keeping it brief is important. It's also wise to talk personally – just telling your story, and without any tone that suggests you are trying to convince them. We cannot 'convert' any person anyway! Only God's Spirit can do that - and even he has a high respect for each person's free will. However, we can encourage people to consider faith – and that's what this is about.

Consider Jesus eating at the table with Zacchaeus the 'sinful tax-collector'. Despite his obvious sin and compromise, he did not feel judged by Jesus. They were clearly engaged in meaningful conversation too. The freedom of a conversation has a lot to do with the dynamics of a conversation! If someone brings their agenda to the start of a conversation, it presumes the other person is interested. However, with respect and wisdom, questions can be asked, conversations can open up, and lives can be changed!



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How to disagree without disagreeing

One of the key skills to learn in conversation is how to engage winsomely with a person you disagree with. This is especially important given the number of things we can disagree on. Consider that half the population vote on the political 'left', and the other half 'right'. If we were to add even just our religious differences to the mix, we could disagree with most of the population. This makes knowing how to navigate disagreement very important.

Here is a key: When people say something we disagree with, applaud what is good while asking questions about what you 'don't understand'. By doing this you put the other person at ease, while also keeping the conversation going.

I've used this approach many times. A notable example I often tell was when a friend spoke up to say they'd been thinking about the importance of spiritual things. I asked what they were thinking to do about this, to which they said they were thinking of getting into Ouija boards.

Some might be tempted at this point to express their surprise and distaste for Ouija boards – which are connected with the occult. Knowing this person as I did, I knew that any 'challenge' at this point of the conversation would end the conversation! So, I did what is suggested above. I said, "Great - I love that you see yourself as a

spiritual person! Me thinking of looking



too! Why are you at Ouija boards?"



A meaningful conversation followed within which I was later able to express my confusion at their thoughts. I sincerely couldn't understand what was so attractive about Ouija boards when Christianity was there as an alternative option. They replied with their reasons for not considering Christianity – and for the first time we began to discuss the real issues related to spiritual things for them!

Getting to the heart of a matter is sometimes a bit like peeling the layers of an onion. For this reason, learning to 'disagree without disagreeing' is important. The topics that are discussed early in a spiritual conversation are sometimes a smoke screen. If we get too distracted by them we might miss the deeper matters buried beneath. However, with some gentle and respectful questions, these matters can be uncovered!

So, the next time there is a clear difference between you and someone else – like your spouse, kids, boss, colleague or friend, applaud what is good while asking questions about what you 'don't understand.' You might be surprised!



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The power of a testimony

The Scriptures tell us that, when God works in our lives, it isn't always with just us in mind. He has given us stories to pass on (2 Corinthians 1:3-4) – and every believer has numerous possible stories they could tell!

Faith stories are powerful tools for witness too. About 70% of people in our society claim to have had a spiritual experience of some kind. While many people are not ready to put faith in God, most are interested in these kinds of stories!

- Our testimonies can relate - because they connect with real life challenges
- They can't be argued with - because they are our stories
- If they are interesting and memorable too – potentially catalysing ongoing thoughts and conversation
- Most importantly, they are evidence to the reality of God!

Regarding what we might share in a testimony – it is very simple.

- (i) What you were like before God worked in your life
- (ii) What did God do, and a little of how
- (iii) What changed as a result?

Regarding length, a good goal would be to tell stories in just 1 to 2 minutes (160 to 320 words when written out in full). Any longer, and we will be in danger of overtalking, and undermining the openness of the conversation.

Regarding our



manner, the key is



to keep it simple and honest. In a media-saturated world like ours people feel that everyone is trying to sell them something. For this reason, 'authenticity rules the roost!' An honest faith story can be impacting! And all that's needed to keep the conversation going afterwards is a good question!

A lot of people are spiritually discouraged – including non-believers. Many believers would like to believe in a God who is loving and good. They just can't see how such a God could exist, for example, when there is so much suffering – and also so many religions. A worldview has developed within which a few million people now hold a common sceptical view together – with negative media stories to support. *What testimonies do is push against this tide of scepticism and doubt.* They suggest that maybe a good God really is still 'alive and kicking' somewhere. Maybe he can be prayed to – and even connected with.

Your stories matter! What are the one or two main stories from your faith journey that you could practice and tell?



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Becoming effective in a hostile environment

One of the words used to explain the way our society currently operates is 'secularism'. Many think this means 'the absence of any religion in the public square', and that this is something we've agreed upon together as New Zealanders. But this isn't true.

Our nation's first Parliamentary debate was actually about who would open in prayer – which is to say, they assumed that we were going to be Christian in our general values and practices. The question they had was instead, which Christian denomination would get the upper hand through praying first. It was never about the exclusion of Christian religion from the public square. For example, if they let an Anglican pray would that make us an Anglican nation like England? So, a man was sent down the street to bring the first pastor he found back to pray, and that's how the problem was resolved.

Our primary values as a nation come from the Christian faith, including our cultural views on compassion and charity, equality, humans rights and more. The challenge we face is that is that the public have been cut off from their history – and so much so that even many of our leaders in government, media and education don't know our history. As noted above, even the word 'secular' has changed meanings. There is now a growing hostility toward our faith. What are we to do? How about considering that Jesus lived in a hostile environment too?





In Jesus' day, Israel was under Roman occupation, and saying the wrong thing could literally get a person crucified. The religious leaders of the day were also at odds with Jesus too – to the point where they were regularly trying to trap him in his words because they wanted him killed. Jesus learnt to thrive in this environment - and so can we!

Sometimes Jesus needed to be bold - like when he criticised some religious leaders for their hypocrisy. But there were also plenty of times Jesus needed to be wise – and stayed silent. There were questions he refused to answer.

The principle I learn from Jesus is this: If a person is interested, we engage with them. But if they are disinterested, we try to intrigue them. If they are hostile, we deflect them!

Our environment is becoming increasingly hostile toward our religion. But let's remember, this doesn't mean that our faith and witness can't thrive!



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Answering questions with questions

In Matthew 22 the Pharisees came to trap Jesus in his words. Their representatives said "Teacher, we know that you are a man of integrity and that you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. You aren't swayed by others, because you pay no attention to who they are. Tell us then, what is your opinion? Is it right to pay the imperial tax to Caesar or not?"

Interestingly, Jesus didn't directly answer to their question. Instead, he replied their question with a question. This is a valuable skill to practice as a question can uncover a matter, reveal a person's motives, and buy us time to consider carefully what to say next.

Of note, Jesus didn't avoid answering their question because he was intimidated. It is because he was wise! He discerned that something else was going on. He saw through their flattery and realised it was a trap. So he stated it plainly. "You hypocrites! Why are you trying to trap me?" To put it another way, Jesus understood that the question they asked wasn't the real question. Because of their assumptions, the real question was maybe more like this: "Jesus, are you dumb enough to give us a straight answer to our question? Because if you are, we can get you in a lot of trouble!"

In our own nation



public leaders



have failed to call our media and universities to account, to protect our freedoms of information, conscience and speech. The result is that, if you speak openly on a growing list of topics, you can quickly find yourself being personally criticised, attacked, hated and maligned. This is a global trend in Western nations. This is no different to how things were in Jesus' day. Jesus models the wisdom we need!

However, Jesus replied with questions to deflect questions on other occasions also. It was a technique he used to understand a person's motives. For example, when a friendly rich man said "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus replied with question, and then a provocative statement. He was investigating the man's motives. For a comparison, in Acts 16 Paul and Silas were asked the same question by a jailer – and they answered directly. The reason for the difference is in the context.

So, next time you are asked a tricky question, or don't know what a person's motives are, how about answering their question with a question? It's certainly something Jesus did!



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Avoiding the quotable quote

In Matthew 21 Jesus was teaching in the temple courts when some religious leaders came and said to him. “By what authority are you doing these things - and who gave you this authority?” While Jesus knew the answer to their question, he chose not to answer. He understood they could not accept the answer – and in fact would use it against him. So he avoided saying something they could negatively quote him on later! He replied their question with a question. In summary, he said, ‘Answer my question and I’ll answer yours. Was John’s baptism from man or from God?’ It was a clever question and because they too did not want to give an answer they could be quoted on. Jesus therefore didn’t need to answer their original question!

As a point of reflection: Why are stories like this recorded in the Scriptures? The answer has to be because they show the profound wisdom Jesus had when dealing with tricky situations. So let’s apply the same strategy!

In another example, in John 8 a Jewish woman was brought to Jesus who’d been caught in the act of adultery. The Jewish law said she should be stoned. So they asked Jesus, “What do you say we should do?” It was a trap. Jesus couldn’t deny the Jewish law – but the Jews also didn’t have authority to give the death sentence, so Jesus couldn’t say ‘stone her’ even if he wanted to (which he didn’t). They were living under Roman occupation!



So, imagine the cameras are rolling. It's the evening news on TV – and it's live. "Tell us Jesus. What's your answer?" Yet still he refused to reply. The context tells us it was awkward. Eventually, because 'they kept pressing for an answer', we know he did speak. "Let any one of you who is without sin throw the first stone." The accusers left one by one, and a potentially lethal situation was avoided.

Should we always be open and honest? These have been values that have defined our culture. Our systems of law, Government and morality have all been profoundly influenced by the Christian faith – creating a culture of honesty and integrity, with a remarkable lack of corruption! However, the answer to the question is actually, "No!" While we should always be honest, being open depends entirely on the situation! This is why Jesus said not to throw 'pearls to the swine', and why he also said we should be 'as wise as serpents, yet as harmless as doves'.

Our culture is changing. It is still possible to engage people around us in all sorts of conversations – but there is also a time to stay silent. Avoiding statements on certain things is sometimes wise.



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When it's right to confuse people

Contrary to what many think, Jesus did not always make matters clear. Because we enjoy such amazing freedoms in our society, we've looked at Jesus through the lenses of this freedom. But our culture is changing. What if we were to consider looking at Jesus through a different set of lenses?

Jesus parables were a tool for communication. We have commonly viewed them as illustrations that were memorable and that made spiritual points clear. What we've not so-often noticed is that Jesus never explained the parables to the crowds!

In Matthew 13, following the parable of the sower, the disciples couldn't understand what Jesus was saying, so they asked, "Why do you speak to the people in parables?" He replied, "Because the knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them."

For another example, it says in Matthew 13:34 that Jesus didn't "...say anything to [the crowds] without using a parable." In John 16:29-30 the disciples talk about how Jesus' public speaking was actually unclear, saying it was shrouded in "figures of speech". Yet when he was alone with his own disciples, he explained everything." (Mark 4:34).

Why did he mask public? I suggest it



the truth before the is because there



were a range of people in the audience. Some were interested, some disinterested, and others hostile.

The parables were powerful tools. For those who were interested they could be reflected upon and understood. The innuendo of Mark 4:13 confirms this. For those who were disinterested it was different through. The parables were a tool of intrigue to get them thinking. However, for those who were hostile the parables didn't give them the quotable quote or media scoop that they wanted! In short, the parables were a mechanism for sifting audiences.

Reflecting on this, what might our comparison be? How about stories of God at work in our nation's bicultural history, as well as in giving us the core values that have shaped our culture? These stories would relate differently to different audiences in the same way!

In summary, Jesus spoke to the crowds, and so must we. None of this is an excuse for silence! However, Jesus was also careful and wise in what he said and where. There is a time to explain a matter – and also a time to leave it concealed. It is sometimes wise to make a matter plain, and sometimes not. We must know our audience. Let's learn from Jesus!



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