

On Witnessing
by
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If there is one thing that all of us have gotten hung up on in our Christian lives it is witnessing. Even evangelists admit to having fears over it at times. In thinking through this dilemma and in reading many books and articles on the subject, I've tried to narrow down certain principles of sharing our faith. If we could clear up some misconceptions and reemphasize precious truths, we just might shake off some of those goosebumps.

Some psychologists tell us that we are motivated by either fear or truth. We will act in response to the one which moves us the most. And often we must choose between them rather quickly. Let's take a situation in which a legal secretary is sitting at her desk. Her boss rushes in and says, "Mary, quickly, hide this in your desk. I've got ten thousand dollars of stolen money in this bag. They're after me, but I know they won't search you. If they ask if you know anything about the money, please say no." Mary's boss then rushes off to hide in his office. What does Mary do?

Well, she can be motivated to do one of two things based on one of the two forces pressing in on her. If fear is dominant, she might think, "I can't say no. I need this job. Bill has been laid off for months. We scrape by as it is. Mr. Courthouse has been so good to me. Oh, I hope I don't get caught."

But Mary does have another choice. She can be motivated by the truth. She might say, "Mr. Courthouse, I'm sorry. I am a Christian woman and under no circumstances can I allow myself to be an accomplice to this crime."

You see, her ultimate decision will be determined by which motivational force is the strongest. It's the same way in witnessing. Either we will give way to fear or truth. If the Lord has impressed us to share Christ with an unbeliever, we will either stop short out of fear or launch out in truth.

Yet even when we are desirous of following truth wherever it takes us, there is still the problem of ignorance. We just might not know the truths of witnessing and, in the process, botch things up badly!

There are many instances of people trying to center their actions around truth, but because they never understood that truth, their goal is never reached.

When I was a boy, I loved sports. I enjoyed them a little more than homework!?! Now I was always BIG. Most often I was the tallest in my class. Back then, I was big and skinny. People would come to the house and say, "Hey Joey, I'll bet you're great at basketball." That would have been my immediate assessment of the truth too, if I had seen a tall skinny kid. (Through the years I've added a few pounds. People started asking me if I was a linebacker. That was OK too, I thought I'd better start losing weight though when they started asking about Sumo wrestling.)

The question about basketball was a constant one. The problem was that basketball was my worst sport. The only dribbling I could do had to be wiped away with a handkerchief.

My friends used to love to take me with them to play other neighborhoods. Invariably, I'd be chosen first. (Or second, if our neighborhood got the first choice.) The other team would see this big drink of water and say, "I'll take the moose." Well after the first game, it was the consensus of opinion that "Moose" ought to go buy the sodas. They were nice about it though. They paid for my soda and gave me bus fare to buy them, in Hoboken, New Jersey!

These poor guys didn't want to lose. They wanted to win. They were motivated by truth in choosing sides. They figured the big guy had to be good. They were wrong. They wanted to act on facts, but their facts were inaccurate, and they suffered for it.

There are Christians who want to do what is right. They want to witness effectively, but they are using the wrong set of facts. Eventually, it can be devastating.

Of course, when you put these two forces together, fear and wrong facts, you find that Christians really wind up in a pickle. They fluctuate between fear and error, and often give up in hopeless despair.

Do you remember the story about the high school boy who had a part-time job in the local supermarket? He was working in the produce department when a big gorilla-shaped man walked in and demanded a half of a head of lettuce. Politely the boy replied that lettuce was not sold by the half head and that he would have to purchase the entire head. Well before this young man could finish his sentence, the big ape trapped junior's head by the throat, pushed him up against the tomatoes and told

him that his blood and the tomato juice would soon be intermingled if the young boy did not comply.

The young boy, shaking with fear, promised that he would do the best he could, but would first have to get permission from the manager.

Motivation--Fear. As the young boy walked to the rear of the store, he started being motivated by truth. "Who is that guy to intimidate me? I'll just call the police." Well, when he got to the back of the store, he was full of courage. But he did not know that our hairy friend had followed right behind him. Junior, thinking he was alone, shouts out to his manager, "YO--Pete, some big lughead wants to buy a half a head of lettuce." Just as he finished, he noticed who was behind him. But the quick thinking lad spoke up, "And this gentleman wishes to purchase the other half."

Was he motivated by fear or truth? You tell me! We do know one thing. He was in a quandry. That's where many are when it comes to sharing their faith. Desirous to do right, but just plain old frustrated.

I would like to clear UP three common misconceptions about witnessing and then emphasize two precious truths. I trust after we are done you will have a better understanding of the facts and, as a result, be a more bold and effective witness. Much thanks goes to Lewis Sperry Chafer for his astute thoughts.

MISCONCEPTION # 1 MEN God only chooses certain ones to witness.

People who believe this are quick to point to Ephesians 4:11. "And He gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, EVANGELISTS; and some, pastors and teachers." They believe that evangelism is a gift given to "some". They are absolutely correct. God does give some evangelists. But being an evangelist and being a witness are not necessarily the same thing. I praise the Lord for those "some" whom God has called as evangelists. But God has called us all to witness} In fact, in the context the evangelist is to "equip the saints" to share their faith.

At the end of Matthew's Gospel, the Lord commanded the disciples to teach or make disciples. True, he was speaking to a few at the time, but they are now in heaven. Surely then his command was for all disciples of Christ.

This attitude of "only some" has bad effects in the church if people start to believe it. I refer to it as Dr. Howard Hendricks does—The Pillar-Caterpillar Philosophy. That is where the church sees some as the pillars

of the church. The pillars hold up the church with their faithfulness and service. Those who aren't pillars are "caterpillars". Their job is to crawl in and out under the pillars each Sunday!!

This type of thinking is bad for the pillar and the caterpillar. How well I remember the day the Lord smashed this theory to smithereens! I enjoyed witnessing so much as a young Christian that it was not long before my pastor suggested that I learn more about it. I read books, attended seminars and soon was teaching a class of my own. As a conscientious teacher always does, I went back for a refresher course. The material was all the same. In fact, if the seminar leader got sick, I would have had no qualms about taking over.

The class culminated in a two-day canvass of the area. Those of us that had taken the course, both advanced and novice, hit the streets and shared our faith using the dreaded method of "door to door". This was no big deal for me, I did it all the time.

The teacher taught us exactly what to do. We memorized the routine so we didn't have to think about it.

Step One – Knock in a friendly and dignified manner,
Step Two – Take three steps back from the door. Step Three – Flash your friendliest smile.
Step Four – Say, "Hello, my name is Joe Basile. This is my friend Harry. We're from First Church and would like to etc., etc."

Simple! Right? Well, on the way there my friend Mark, a young teen, developed logus of the bogus plus a touch of pure panic!

Now the rules were simple. Everybody had to do it! Everybody! Mark looked at me once we were away from the leaders and, with plaintive eyes, informed me of his absolute inability to "do it". What did I do? Did I say a few encouraging words and tell him he'd do fine? No! Like a real idiot I remembered I was a pillar. He was a caterpillar!! I spread my peacock wings and said, "Don't worry kid (kid? Oh, brother!) I'll take care of it."

I can still see his eyes of admiration as he sighed, "Thanks Joe." There we went, walking up to the first door. Little did I know that the Lord was soon going to teach us both a lesson.

Knock, Knock! Step back three paces. Flash friendly smile! Door opens. Yours truly begins with all the confidence of a five star general. "Hello, my name is ... uh.. uh!?!?"

The poor woman looked in amazement as a 6' 5" bearded man stood in front of her door with his mouth posing as the better mouse trap. For the life of me I could not remember what came next—my name. At this point the only pillar I felt like was the one Samson knocked over. But the Lord had a purpose! Mark jumped right in and said, "Er, hello, my name is Mark, this is my friend Joe..." He took over and handled it beautifully. I was mortified but Mark was encouraged. The lesson? God wanted to let us both know that all are called and able to witness. There are no pillars or caterpillars.

Many people leave this privilege to the minister. Dear one, don't you realize that your contacts in evangelism are, at times, much better than the pastor's? Some feel he is just paid to be "religious". But you are real in their eyes.

A good friend of mine was witnessed to by three clergymen within several weeks. Want to know what clinched it for him? A roofer gave his testimony. Later Tom said, "That guy was like me." Tom got saved.

God has called us all to witness.

MISCONCEPTION # 2 METHOD

I've got to know the right method before I can witness.

This upsets a lot of people. They say, "I'm afraid I'll say the wrong thing." "I don't know enough."

There is a story in the ninth chapter of John's Gospel about a man healed by the Lord Jesus. Needless to say, the Pharisees were much annoyed by this and began asking him questions. The man's response in verse 25 is classic. "He answered and said, 'Whether he be a sinner or no, I know not: one thing I know, that, whereas I was blind, now I see.'"

From all we can tell in this passage, this man was a great witness. He was even willing to incur the wrath of the "higher-ups" to tell what he knew. And therein lies the secret to the method of witnessing. Tell what YOU KNOW!

This man was healed. He was not a theological scholar. He hadn't even taken a course at a Bible Institute! Yet his boldness to tell what he knew is a testimony to us all.

Let me say this. It is good to take courses and read books on witnessing and sharing your faith. Get all the education you can but don't let the lack of systematic training keep you from sharing your faith.

In any court of law, a witness is not expected to do anything but tell what he knows. I believe most of us have been bored to tears listening to someone go on and on about the things of God when we have a gut reaction that the picture they are drawing is three times its size! Away with such falseness. Tell us what Christ means to you.

Can you imagine anyone going into a U.S. courtroom and pulling that baloney? I can! I did!

While I was a student at Rutgers University, my friend, Steve and I grew quite close. We drove back and forth to school together almost everyday. One day we were in an accident. In all honesty, it was the other guy's fault. We were stopped, and he plowed right into us. To make a long story short, this was before the days of no-fault insurance, and Steve was forced to go to court. The company which employed the truck driver would not cooperate.

Steve called me several days after the accident and said, "Joe, I've got to go to court. Will you go with me as a witness?" As the answer "Yes." passed my lips, a picture crossed my mind. Perry Mason Basile; my chance to shine! After all, I had taken six credits in Living Theatre. I'd win that case for my friend Steve hands down. What a dope I was!

I'm embarrassed to think about it, but from that day until the day of the court case, I came home after classes and practiced my part. Standing in front of a full length mirror, I'd start, "Your Honor"... no, no ... too pushy, "Your Hoonorrr",... no, too mushy..."Yoourr Honoorr"... That's it! That's it!

And I went on. "Yoourr Honoorr, there I was, minding my own business (so I wasn't original—so what) sitting in the passenger seat of my friend's car, when, all of a sudden, this drunk (how would I know that) who must have gotten his driver's license from Sears and Roebuck, plowed mercilessly into the side of our automobile," Ugh! As I think of it now, I can hardly believe it. About the only part of the statement that was true was, "there I was".

Did I ham it up! After three months of practice, you get quite good you know. I was preparing for my debut! The night before the trial Steve called. "Are you all set for tomorrow, Joe?" He should have known how set I was. "Sure Steve, I think so."

The next day we walked in. Everything looked official, especially me with my suit and briefcase attitude. Funny thing though, as soon as I walked in it seemed as though the judge spotted me. It wasn't a bad look, just a knowing one. Hmmm!

As the case proceeded, it wasn't at all like Perry Mason. It was more like watching the unemployment line. But I wouldn't let that deter me. After all, three months of practice is three months of practice. Besides, Gregory Peck was an usher before he was a star.

The judge called my friend Steve to the bench. After a few preliminaries he said, "Mr. L., would you please state in your own words what happened on the day of April 12?"

I don't remember all of what Steve said, but it was brief and to the point. It was something like, "I was stopped at the light, and Mr. K. hit me on the left side." Short and sweet. I thought to myself, "He should have practiced." Steve returned to the dugout, and Perry Mason was on deck.

The Judge said, "Is Mr. Joseph Rocco Basile Jr. here?" With a booming voice I chanted, "Yes, Your Honor." I about blew the Judge off of his seat with that one sentence. Did he look annoyed! That knowing look turned into an "I'll fix him" look.

"Mr. Basile, approach the bench." I started, "Yoourr Honoor, there I was" He interrupted. "Mr. Basile, do you agree with Mr. L.'s testimony?" "Why yes." "Then sit down," ??? "But..." "Sit down!" "Yes your honor." Did you ever see a grown man cry? All those months wasted. I probably couldn't even get Gregory Peck's ushering job. What a lesson!

That Judge didn't want verbiage. He wanted facts. He wanted me to tell what I knew. Oh, if we as Christians could only apply that to our witnessing. What pressure it would relieve.

When I was first saved, I could not wait to share my faith. I admit I made some terrible mistakes. For a while there I tried to prove the Bible to win people to the Lord. I would have been much better off had I just told what Christ meant to me and could mean to them.

My parents got the brunt of many of my mistakes. I can remember arguing with my mother about Noah's ark, Cain's wife and evolution. I did not make a dent.

One day she visited me and out of a clear blue sky asked, "What does it mean to be born again?" I could have fallen over. I'd been trying to tell her for years.

When I inquired as to why she asked, she related this story. Before work, all the women in the office meet for coffee. They discuss everything. This one day was different. One of the girls had gotten saved. No sooner did she begin to talk of the Lord than she was bombarded with cynical questions about Noah's ark, Cain's wife and evolution. The girl, a bit scared, simply said, "Girls, I can't answer your questions. I don't know. I'll try to find out for you. But one thing I do know. Last week I asked the Lord Jesus to save me, and my life has not been the same since,"

That sincere word from the girl who "told what she knew" had lodged itself in my mother's heart and would not leave until I had the privilege of leading my mother to Christ.

Please Christian, don't get upset or sidetracked. The Lord has not put a giant burden on your back. He simply wants you to tell what you know.

MISCONCEPTION # 3 MESSAGE

I mention God in my conversation. Isn't that enough?

I'm convinced that one of the biggest problems about witnessing for the Christian who does attempt to share his faith is that he fails to make plain how to become a Christian.

Romans 10:9,10 state, "That if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved. For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation"

The Gospel message is wonderful. We are sinners. We deserve eternal punishment. God loved us so much that He sent His son to pay the price in our stead. If we but ask and believe in faith, we shall receive forgiveness. Blessed be His Name!

How true it is that we can give all the gory details of our past life, praise God for our present life, but leave people in the dark as to how to join us.

Faith in what God has done saves us. Prayer is often the means used to express that faith. But it is belief in Christ that saves us. Oh to make that clear! It is so important, but it is uncanny how it is obscured.

It reminds me of the first few times I traveled by train or subway. I was really green although I tried to look like a seasoned traveler. I knew the name of the stop, but how to know I was there when I got there was beyond me. My only hope was the conductor. I'd seen enough movies to know that he yells out the stop before you get there. So I was safe, At least I thought so. Out he came from his post. He slams open the door and yells out the stop, "Faaa Quaa." What? What did he say? I look around to see if anyone else caught it. They are all ignoring him. They have ridden this thing so often they get off purely by seat timing. All I can do is pray that Faaa Quaa was not my stop. Here he comes again. Door slams open, "Feeshnaa, next stop. Feeshnaa." It's no use, I'm sure to wind up In Bayonne, New Jersey.

Embarrassed as can be, I approached him quietly, not wanting to unmask my ignorance. I whispered, "Sir, when do we stop at Valley Place?" Then I get it. In crisp clear distinguishable tones he bellowed, "What's the matter son, don't you know your way around? Don't worry, you just sit tight. I'll help you." You guessed it—EVERY EYE on the train looked UP and followed me back to my seat.

How much like the believer. He may come through loud and clear when embarrassing a person, but the Gospel is veiled in shadow. By all means, if anything should be clear, it should be how to be saved.

I used to teach men in my church how to share their faith. One of the rules of thumb I gave them was to share their faith in such a way that anyone overhearing the conversation would know how to become a Christian. If we do that for the eavesdropper, then the person we're speaking to can't help but get it.

I can remember, shortly after giving my men this lesson, I flew from Pennsylvania to California. I sat next to a Japanese woman who happened to be a Buddhist. I said to myself, "I've got to make this doubly plain. I've got to make it plain to anyone listening, but more importantly, her English is weak, I've got to make it plain to her."

I knew I succeeded when halfway through my explanation, she interrupted. "Oh, I see. You think I'm going to hell." The message was plain up to that point.

People may respond positively or negatively, but by all means, make the message plain.

Now I want to deal with two positive truths. Understand them, and you will save yourself a lot of false guilt.

MAN'S INABILITY

1 Corinthians 2:1*4- says, "But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned."

This doctrine of man's inability to trust Christ apart from the ministry of the Holy Spirit allows us to sharply distinguish between our responsibility and God's responsibility.

We don't save anybody! God does. Proverbs 11:30 says, "He that winneth souls is wise." Soul-winning is a wonderful expression, But we must always remember that although God uses us as the instruments to share the message, the Holy Spirit does the miraculous converting. Again, we don't convert anyone. God does.

A famous story is told of evangelist D.L. Moody. He was in the midst of an evangelistic crusade. One afternoon he decided to go for a walk. He was brusquely jeered by a scoffer. In loud, attention-getting tones he yelled, "Well Mr. Moody, one of your converts from last night is in the bar across the street—drunk." Mr. Moody's answer was typically to the point. "He must be one of my converts. He couldn't be one of God's."

Do you see the point? Yes, we can be saddened that people do not come to Christ., Yes, we can and should plead with them, but we are not responsible for their decision. God told the prophet Samuel not to be dismayed by the rejection of Israel. Why? Because the people were rejecting God Himself, not Samuel, Certainly Samuel had no delight in the people's rejection of God, but God did relieve Samuel's mind in that Samuel did not have to put the blame on himself.

One of the best definitions of witnessing I've ever heard is from Campus Crusade for Christ. "A successful witness is sharing Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit and leaving the results to God." That definition has saved me many hours of needless anguish. Oh may God keep me faithful in my task. And may God make me to know what that task is. I witness. God saves.

GOD'S ABILITY

How I praise God for showing me over and over again how true this is. Let's take Elijah as an example. James 5:17-18 reads,

"Elijah was a man subject to like passions as we are, and he prayed earnestly that it might not rain: and it rained not on the earth by the space of three years and six months. And he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain, and the earth brought forth her fruit."

I love those verses. It tells me first that Elijah was just like us. I fear we often deify these men. We shouldn't. They were men. Yes, Elijah had bad breath in the morning. He might have had dandruff. And he most certainly got pimples just before he had a big date. He was a man like us. But...he knew where power came from—God. He prayed. He knew that the most powerful being in the universe moved through prayer.

Do we know that? Do we believe that? I once heard it said that we ought to do more of speaking to God about a person than speaking to that person about God. Now, don't get me wrong. We should and must witness. But, if God does the converting, let's remember to pray, pray, pray. Speak more to God about the person than to that person about God.

So many times I've been driven by God to this point. I remember when I was speaking at a youth retreat. We had a kid on that retreat that had all it took to ruin the retreat. He was about 16. Did you hear what Mark Twain said about 16 year olds? He said when a boy turns 11 you ought to put him in a barrel and seal the top. Then you should feed him through a hole in the side. When he turns 16—plug the hole. This fellow was that type of guy.

All during the retreat he was a monster. Every counselor tried to get through to him. Finally, the pastor asked if I would try. Try I did, but to no avail. He was as cold and un-moved as could be. Finally in exasperation I said, "Bill, I don't know what else to say to you except that I'm going to pray for you. I have a book at home in which I put the names of people for whom I've promised the Lord that I will pray for the rest of my life," He looked at me and said, "Thanks. Can I go now?" He left. He continued to be a terror. I continued to pray.

Years later I got a call from an ex-school chum of mine. After we chatted for a while, he told me of his church and his new youth pastor. He said, "Do you remember Bill from the retreat?" I said, "I sure do." "Well," my friend said, "He's my new youth pastor. And he wants me to give you a message, "Please tell Joe Basile he can stop praying for me!"

Not on his life. Right now, I'm praying with him through grad school and hopefully Christian work. Oh the grace of God. Oh how His power is shown and is available.

Dear Christian, I offer these principles with the strong desire that we will get to the work of sharing Christ before His return. It's not just certain men. It's not just certain methods. Keep the message plain. Share Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit and leave the results to God. And talk more to God about the person than to the person about God.