

Why Christians "Bug" People with the Gospel

by Joe Zickafoose

In an editorial in our university paper, a columnist vented her spleen against "born-again Christians" who pester her about being saved. In a letter to the editor on the same page a writer claimed that "fundamentalist Christians" who see the world only in "black or white, good or evil" are of the same stripe as the Ayatollah Khomeini; implying that the line between evangelizing and making death threats is rather fine.

Why then, especially under the heat of rather unflattering comparisons, do Christians continue to bug people with the gospel? Why can't they just live and let live and leave well enough alone?

The answer revolves around a little five-letter word: Truth. First of all Christians believe in the truth. What I mean is, Christians believe that there is such a thing as truth. There are some things that are true and others that are not. Second, Christians believe that the truth is knowable. I realize that this is not the current intellectual fad. The university community seems to be comfortable with verifying the nuts and bolts of the universe but when it comes to clarifying what it all means they are more comfortable with agnosticism.

Agnosticism is literally, "Not-know-ism" and there are basically two versions. The first kind of agnosticism says, "The truth about God may be knowable, I just do not yet have enough information to make that determination, but I am still looking." I can respect that. There are too many wildly divergent claims about God and his expectations of us for one not to investigate and verify those claims. As a Christian I would say that a serious and sincere inquirer is precious to God and that eventually God will make Himself known to this person.

The second kind of agnostic says, "There may be a God but if there is, it really doesn't matter because no one could ever know for sure and there is no point in looking for him." This kind of person refuses to take evidence and testimony about God seriously because he or she believes a doctrine that pre-empts all truth. This doctrine is embraced because the person simply wishes it to be so. It is hard to respect a position that precludes further investigation. It lacks integrity and sincerity.

The third thing that Christians believe about the truth is that the truth is a person. The truth is not merely an abstract idea; the truth is embodied in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus made this claim about himself: "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6). This is a grandiose and narrow-minded claim, unless of course it is true.

Every person is forced to answer Jesus' own question: "But what about you? Who do you say that I am?" He is either who he says he is or he is a liar or crazy. Enough banal talk of Jesus being a "good teacher!" He does not give us that option. It is true that many people respond to Jesus' question by ignoring it, but that is an answer in itself. If you are not a Christian, this is probably why you feel "bugged" by Christians who press this question. You may be content to leave the question unanswered, but Jesus' question has always been urgent and insistent: "Tell me right now; are you for me or against me?"

The fourth thing that Christians believe about the truth is that the truth matters. Jesus did certainly not share the opinion that "all roads eventually lead to the same place". In fact, Jesus talked about hell more than any other subject. I realize that this is offensive to many people, but there it is. Jesus' most common word for hell was not the Greek word Hades or the Hebrew word Sheol, but the word Jesus used the most to describe hell was Gehenna. Gehenna means literally, the Valley of Hinnom, which was a burning garbage dump outside Jerusalem's southeast wall. The image is vivid: hell is the place where God sends that in his creation which refuses to be redeemed. He does this not with glee but with sorrow over those who could have been saved but chose themselves to be lost. What you believe about the truth does matter.

Pontius Pilate's pseudo-philosophical question echoes throughout the modern university: "What is truth?" It implies an agnosticism that believes that if there is such a thing as truth it is unknowable or irrelevant. Pilate's question becomes tragic when we realize that he asked it in the very presence of the man who was and is the truth. He had the opportunity to know the truth but recoiled from it. Christians want to provide the opportunity for every person who is willing to know the truth to hear for themselves the claims of Jesus Christ.

Why do Christians bug people with the gospel? They care enough about people and the truth to risk being disliked and excluded. But what do you expect? So did Jesus.