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What Christianity Explained has meant to me...

“Christianity Explained answered many of the questions, some angry, that I had about religion. It gave me a basic understanding of what Christianity is all about, and made me want to go on learning and exploring the Bible. I’ve come to understand that Christ was not just an historical figure that some obscure Roman governor caused to be crucified, but the Son of God, who really did give his life for me, and I treasure this gift.”

A MOTHER

“The Christianity Explained course was my introduction to any sort of Bible-study group. When I first attended the course, I knew only of God and that he may exist. By the time the course was completed, I was firmly assured in my belief of God and his word. I have since become a Christian who knows what it was like not to have God in my life. I compare this to life now with God and the known fact that Jesus died for me on the cross, and I am now trying to spread God’s word to other people.”

A YOUNG MAN

“Before I began this course, I would have described myself as agnostic. I believed that there must be a God, but how was I to know who that God is, or which God I should follow? Doing this course made it easy for me to understand Christianity. I now know that I have eternal life. I know God accepts me by his grace, and that my sins are forgiven through the death of Jesus, in whom I now believe.”

A DOCTOR

The
principles
behind
Christianity
Explained

Preparing yourself for evangelism

1. Spiritual self-preparedness is everything

In John chapter 4, Jesus speaks to the woman at the well. Now there were many good reasons that Jesus could have found for not talking to her:

1. He was tired, hot, thirsty and hungry (4 v 6).
2. It was socially not done for men and women to converse in public (4 v 27).
3. Jews normally had no dealings with Samaritans (4 v 9).
4. Jesus knew that the woman had a bad reputation – he ran the risk of tarnishing his own image (4 v 17).

Yet Jesus did speak to her. He was spiritually prepared and alert to grasp the opportunity, no matter what the obstacles.

The spiritual preparation of yourself is everything in personal witnessing. As individual believers, we need several types of preparedness:

- Praying for opportunities
- Looking for opportunities
- Equipped to take opportunities

Christianity Explained can help with the third aspect – being equipped to share the gospel. However, the first and second are a matter of personal spiritual discipline. If you are not **praying** and **looking**, then, by and large, the opportunities will pass you by.

2. Capitalizing on casual opportunities

Quite often, concerned Christians have good opportunities to speak personally to their friends on spiritual matters. But these opportunities often wither on the vine: they do not lead on to an extended presentation of the gospel.

Note how Jesus capitalizes on his passing conversation with the woman:

1. The initial discussion over “physical water” (4 v 7) provides Jesus with a bridgehead to speak of “living [spiritual] water” (4 v 10).
2. The woman’s aroused interest provides Jesus with a bridgehead to the people of the town of Sychar. “Come and see...”, she says (4 v 29).
3. His ministry to the townspeople provides a bridgehead for an unscheduled stay of two days (4 v 40). The *casual* conversation becomes an extended *teaching* opportunity.

As stated before, if you are spiritually prepared and aware, quite often you will find yourself in a “spiritual” conversation.

Christianity Explained provides you with a simple tool for capitalizing on that opportunity.

Remember, in personal witnessing *spiritual self-preparedness is everything*.

For discussion

Read John 4 v 31-42

1. Verses 31-34

What is the food Jesus says he has to eat in this passage?

(Hint: remember the context!)

2. Verses 35-38

Do you consider that there is a ripe harvest in your area? What must be done to bring it in?

3. Verses 39-42

Why did Jesus stay an unscheduled two extra days with the Samaritans?

Does this tie in with the “proceed slowly” concept (see page 11)?

4. Compare verses 19, 29 and 42

How had their assessment of Jesus grown?

Principle 1

Assume nothing!

Many traditionally Christian countries, particularly in the western world, have experienced a significant decline in church attendance in the last 20 years. This decrease in attendance has led to a corresponding rise in the number of those who would nominally call themselves Christian but have little understanding of the Christian gospel.

This may be illustrated from the situation in the USA, where only 40 per cent of the population say they are in church on an average Sunday, although 80 per cent would claim to be Christian. Although this looks good on the outside, many view these bald figures with suspicion, suspecting that a good proportion of those who say they are in church on Sunday are intermittent or occasional church attenders at best.

And, of course, being in church does not guarantee that they are hearing good teaching, or that they are people with a genuine understanding of the Christian gospel.

Compared with other western countries, like the UK, Canada and Australia, these church attendance figures are encouraging. But they mask a change that is going on in the culture which has an enormous impact on the way we think about and practice evangelism.

We make the assumption that, because people grow up knowing the language of Christianity, they have a real grasp on what the gospel actually is. That is, they may know the words God, Jesus, faith and repentance, but they have a clouded or mistaken view of what they actually mean, and how they connect with the Christian message.

So it is fatal to imagine that everybody knows quite well what Christianity is and needs only a little encouragement to practice it. The brutal fact is that, in this “Christian country”, perhaps fewer than twenty people in a hundred have the faintest notion what the Bible teaches about God or man or society or the person of Jesus Christ.

A Christian minister was talking to a group of students from a large college when he was interrupted by a female student who said: “Excuse me, you keep on using a word I don’t understand.” He replied: “What word is that?” (wondering if he was using theological jargon again). She replied in all seriousness, “God”.

As one writer has commented, “It is no longer the case of the shepherd leaving the ninety nine sheep safely in the fold while he looks for the one out on the hills. The ninety nine are scattered, lost on the hills!”

The author recently took a husband and wife through this course *Christianity Explained*. As they read the New Testament they asked questions like “Who is Peter?”, “Who is this David?” and “These Pharisees – are they goodies or baddies?” They are typical modern western people, affluent, well educated but almost totally biblically illiterate.

What does this mean for evangelism?

In the past, we could often assume that people had, in their minds, a basic understanding of Jesus Christ and Bible stories. The job of the evangelist was to build on this platform of knowledge.

This is no longer true. It is our contention that, in evangelism today, **we must begin from the presupposition that the person you are addressing knows virtually nothing about Jesus, the Bible or the gospel.** In the majority of cases, this presupposition will be correct.

As a result of this diminishing knowledge of God in our culture, “crusade” style evangelism has become less and less effective with the passing of time. Not only is it harder to get people to come out to such events, but even those who do make commitments seem to have little idea of what they have done, or why they have taken this step.

Christianity Explained

In this course, the basic assumption is that the person you are taking through has little or no knowledge of Jesus Christ in any meaningful way. You should assume that he or she has never even opened the New Testament.

This does not mean, of course, that you are going to treat the enquirer in a childish or patronising way. It just means that you should not assume any prior knowledge.

In one particular area, this biblical ignorance is chronic, both inside and outside the church. This is the area of “salvation by grace alone” or “justification by faith”. Recently, in a group of eleven adults, all regular members of a reasonably vigorous church, all eleven said that “a Christian is a person who tries to live a good life according to the Ten Commandments”, or some associated answer. Between them they collectively had hundreds of years of church attendance and had listened to thousands of sermons and Bible readings!

Yet such an answer is not just a slight deviation from the truth of say, five degrees. It is 180° off course!

A good rule of thumb is this:

Assume the person you are talking to understands nothing of the gospel until they can tell you, out of their own mouth, what it is.

This course is based on the assumption that the person you are addressing is completely ignorant of Jesus, the Bible and the gospel – even if that person holds a responsible position in your church! In the course of your discussion, you may discover that the person knows a bit more than nothing, and you can adjust your presentation accordingly. But you must not assume it.

A wider application

Although this course has been designed for a traditional, yet declining, Christian culture, it is our belief that it also has a wider use.

Because this course assumes no prior knowledge of the Christian gospel, it is a useful tool for evangelism in other situations as well – for people who have not been traditionally Christian or where first-time evangelism is being undertaken.

We would welcome guidance from evangelists, pastors and missionaries who are working in these situations. Our hope is that the course could be field-tested in a variety of cultures and then constructive suggestions fed back to us. This is already taking place in some countries with good results.

Principle 2

Proceed slowly

The dominance of “quick one-off” evangelism

Since World War II one basic model has often dominated our thinking on this subject of evangelism, particularly in the traditionally Christian countries. We could call this model the “Quick One-off” approach to evangelism, or as one person whimsically calls it, “one-dump” evangelism.

The quick one-off model comes in various forms, but it usually follows this pattern:

1. A summary presentation of the gospel:

A simplified summary of the message of the gospel will be presented to the enquirer(s). This may take the form of an address, as at an evangelistic rally, or a memorized summary of the gospel may be presented to an individual, or the enquirer may be taken through a short tract which highlights the main points of the message.

2. A call to commitment: At the end of this presentation, lasting anywhere from a few minutes to a couple of hours, the enquirer is asked to respond to the gospel in some overt manner, ie: put up a hand, come down to the front, etc. The enquirer is then asked to pray...

3. A prayer of commitment: This prayer expresses a decision to follow Christ. So, quite often after an evangelistic rally, one will hear statements like: “35 people prayed the prayer.”

4. An assumption: Because the enquirer has “prayed the prayer”, it is usually assumed that (a) the person has become a Christian and (b) the person now understands the

Christian gospel. So this leads into...

5. A follow-up nurture course: The new convert is encouraged to participate in a nurture program in which topics like these will be taught: Bible reading, prayer, assurance, church attendance, witnessing, giving, etc.

What’s wrong with the “quick one-off” approach?

In many countries the quick one-off approach has served well in the past, and we need to praise God for those who have come to Christ through its use, and those who continue to do so. But it is our contention here that this model has become less and less effective with the passing of time. The reason for this appears to have been the growing secularization of many societies, as outlined in the chapter “Assume Nothing”.

In many countries less than 5% of the population even have a Sunday School understanding of the gospel, Jesus or Bible stories.

Even those who have made decisions at evangelistic meetings seem to be ignorant of even basic gospel truths. The assumptions made at point (4) above are often erroneous.

During an evangelistic crusade, a colleague was able to speak to many of those who had made “salvation decisions”. He asked them all the well-known question:

Suppose you were to die tonight, and God said to you, “Why should I let you into my heaven?” What would you say?

In not one case over fourteen nights was the

enquirer able to give a reasonable, biblical answer to this question, however simply. In fact, any concept of trusting in the completed work of Christ as the only basis for acceptance with God was totally absent from their understanding. This was not the fault of the evangelist, whose addresses were usually powerful and Biblically based. The “fault” lay in the inability of the hearer to absorb the gospel in one quick presentation. It is not surprising that the fall-off rate from such approaches is so high.

The simple gospel is not simple

Why is it that many people cannot understand even a simplified one-off presentation of the gospel? Let us try to understand the reason.

Recently, a group of Christians was asked:

Imagine you were to write a simple, short presentation of the Christian gospel; what biblical or theological concepts would you expect to be in it?

The answers came back something like this:

1. The character of God (creator, love)
2. Sin
3. God sent Jesus
4. His death for our sins
5. Resurrection
6. Repentance
7. Faith
8. Salvation by grace

The “simple gospel” will usually contain most or all of these concepts. But remember, many today have virtually no understanding of the Christian message. So, using the “quick one-off” approach, we are giving a person who knows nothing at least eight

brand new theological concepts to hear, understand, absorb and respond to – all in one brief presentation!

It is rather like taking an eight-course meal, heaping it all onto one plate and saying to the person, “Digest that!” After one or two concepts, people get spiritual indigestion, and begin to make vague statements of assent, like “Yes, that’s right.”

Learning to teach the gospel

It is our contention here that we need to move away from the “quick one-off” approach as our primary thrust in evangelism. There will be occasions when it will be appropriate, but in general it is becoming increasingly ineffective. We need to learn to teach enquirers the gospel and give them time to digest the content.

Christianity Explained seeks to provide one tool for teaching enquirers the gospel over an extended period of time.

Evangelism in the New Testament

The evangelists in the New Testament appear to have been opportunistic, adapting their methods and, to a limited extent, their message, to each different situation. So, there are examples which are like the quick one-off model, as in the case of the Philippian jailer (Acts 16 v 25-34).

However, the evidence in general points to a more extended approach to evangelism. For example:

On three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that the Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead... Some of the Jews were persuaded

Acts 17 v 2-4

So these words seem to explain the general pattern of evangelism in the New Testament:

reasoned, explained, proved, persuaded, argued, contended. Generally, the apostles and other evangelists do not seem to have practised “one-dump” evangelism, calling for quick decisions. Quite often, it seems that they did not even ask for decisions. Those convicted asked the preacher!

What is Christianity Explained?

Christianity Explained is a six-unit presentation of the gospel, which aims to fulfil this objective of teaching the fundamentals of the Christian faith. This course is based around the Gospel of Mark, which is chosen for its simplicity. The underlying assumption is that the enquirer knows virtually nothing about Jesus and the Bible.

It’s an evangelistic course in that it seeks to lead the person to genuine faith and repentance by the end of the six sessions. It is a low-key approach in that there is no attempt to pressure or manipulate people into a commitment, though the need for a genuine faith-response is clearly and regularly presented.

Each study in the series aims to teach only *one point*, that is, to hit only one target per lesson. Each unit is also evangelistic in its own right, so that at the end of each unit there is a call to respond to Jesus.

In the first three studies, the course builds into the hearer’s mind some basic knowledge about Jesus Christ and his finished work – that he is the Son of God, his death for our sins, and his physical resurrection. During the first three studies, the enquirer is encouraged to read progressively through the Gospel of Mark. (From experience, most adults will do this “homework”.)

In the remaining three studies we address the question:

- **How does the finished work of Jesus apply to me now?**

Again, each study elucidates only one main teaching target per unit.

A word of balance

It should not be thought that this is to imply that we should give up all evangelistic enterprises which might be called quick one-off. We need a variety of approaches, as the apostle Paul says: “*that by all possible means we might save some*” (1 Cor 9 v 22). Rather, this is a plea for a general trend or movement in evangelism away from the quick approach, to a model in which we learn to *teach* the gospel.

The two models can actually go well together. For example, at a large World Expo in Brisbane, Australia, the two approaches were used in tandem. The “Pavilion of Promise”, a Christian pavilion at the Expo, presented crowds with a quick (45-minute) visual portrayal of the gospel. Those who responded after the presentation were followed up with *Christianity Explained*. That is, the follow-up was also **EVANGELISM** and not just **NURTURE**.

Several evangelists are using this course as a second phase to their outreach. In this way, the quick initial presentation plus the extended follow-up are regarded as a whole. This has proved to be a fruitful combination.

A practical example

Recently, a well-known evangelist held an evangelistic outreach service at a large suburban church. Instead of the traditional evangelistic services, a creative approach was used:

- The church arranged as many small home meetings as possible. Christians were allowed to come only if they brought a friend from outside the church. The evangelist spoke at each meeting, giving a condensed gospel presentation.
- At the end of each meeting there was

no call for decisions, but people filled in a card similar to that shown on p.37 of this manual. Those who indicated a response were invited to do a six-week *Christianity Explained* course. By the end of the event over 100 non-Christians were doing *Christianity Explained*.

The quick one-off presentation and the teaching model were thus coupled together, and the two constituted the evangelistic enterprise. The immediate follow-up was again **EVANGELISM** and not just **NURTURE**.

As one involved person commented later:
“it was very effective...”