

Jargon-Free Conversations about Faith

13



FOR THE PAST HOUR, M-TECH'S MANAGEMENT team debated the ethics of releasing software it knew had serious flaws. Knowing their competitor had set a release date for their version, the project team captain argued vigorously for immediate release, with an eye towards issuing patches to fix known problems post-purchase. Delay, she argued, would mean their competition would grab the lion's share of media attention and customer share.

The debate was heated until the owner weighed in. "I appreciate all the points made here in the past hour. I think we all have the company's best interests at heart. But the fact is, I'm a Christian and my name is on the company letterhead. That means I've got to do the right thing. We'll delay the release until we've worked out the major bugs." After that the conversation switched to implementation issues, and continued.

When the meeting ended, Ibrahim stayed behind to speak with the owner.

"Boss, I have to tell you I'm offended by something you said today."

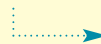
The owner and Ibrahim were college buddies, so he looked up, surprised. "By what?"

"Well," Ibrahim answered, "you Christians always do that. You always imply only Christians want to do the right thing. Do you really believe we Muslims don't want to do the ethical thing, too. Or what about Elliott? Just because Elliott doesn't believe in God, does that mean he doesn't want to do the right thing?"

The owner started to answer, but Ibrahim continued, "No, I mean it. If this faith of yours is just about doing the right thing, then it's not really different than any other faith. I thought it was about Jesus, but I never hear anything about him from you or the other Christians. It's always ethics. Surely your faith is more than that..."

If you're the owner, how would you respond to Ibrahim?

Given that his observations are the ones many other non-Christians tell us here at Marketplace Network, what should we do about it?



Scripture Passages

Matthew 7:13-23
Matthew 7:24-27
Matthew 13:3-9
Matthew 13:24-30

Matthew 13:31-32
Matthew 13:44
Matthew 13:45-46
Matthew 13:47-52

Study

“Born again.”

Jesus used that term in a private conversation, and His listeners went away befuddled. That same term in our society causes confusion even in today’s culture. For many, “born again” is synonymous with right-wing activism on the one-hand, or old-fashioned prudishness on the other.

Studies by George Barna (www.barna.org) demonstrate that even among Christians, Biblical literacy is a serious issue. Our own experience in the workplace affirms this truth, that Biblical literacy is not high among workers. Perhaps more than at any other time in the history of American work culture, we need to find clear, succinct ways to communicate the truths of Christ. In addition to “born again,” can you think of other examples of jargon or phrases we use in our conversations with other Christians that non-Christians might have difficulty understanding?

Missionary history is full of examples of faithful servants “breaking the code” of obscure and diverse groups. They’ve known for centuries what we marketplace Christians often fail to realize: one size (or style of communication) does not fit all. We must see the “tribes” in our workplace and “break the code” so the Gospel can be heard clearly. But how do we do that? The answer is as old as our faith: stories.

Jesus knew this, too. He used stories to great effect, especially the parables we find recorded in the Bible. These illustrated key points in ways that drew word pictures in His listener’s minds. Following his lead, Christians down through the centuries have always used stories to teach as well. (Think Veggie Tales, for just one example; or C.S. Lewis’s *Screwtape Letters*, for another.) Here’s an interesting exercise: List below some of the stories in the Bible that you remember being taught as a child, or first heard as a Christian. Put a check beside those you think your non-believing co-workers might be familiar with.

You may be surprised just how many people have never heard of Jonah or Job. In reading the Scripture passages for this study, were there any traits in Jesus’ parables that jumped out at you? List what you noticed below.

Now let's look at some specific verses. Read Matthew 13:31 and 33. What words are the same? What principle of communication does this suggest? Look at verses 44, 45 and 47.

Like modern-day communication specialists, Jesus understood that repetition was an important way to communicate important truths. What might this teach us about our own conversations about faith at work?

Since only men and women who have a relationship with Jesus Christ can understand the deeper truths of Scripture, the only message that matters in the life of a non-Christian is the gospel of Jesus Christ. We should be looking for ways to say over and over again in compelling and simple fashion just what Jesus did for us, leaving the door open for our coworkers and others to see the invitation for Him to do the same for them.

There's more than a simple message, though. Go back and analyze these verses, and try to identify the audience in each. From your own recollections of the New Testament, what were the vocations of the people of that day? What were the vocations of the men and women closest to Jesus? List them below.

Now, examine these Scripture passages in Matthew and try to identify what audience might best understand each illustration.

13:31-32

13:33

13:44

13:45

13:47

Now compare your list above to the occupations of Jesus' disciples and immediate followers. Are there any intersections? What can we learn from this?

It has been said that ours is a “story culture.” That is, if we want to communicate today, we must do so with stories. The success of *Chicken Soup for the Soul*, Dilbert, music videos and others would seem to support this. People are rarely interested in us telling them how Jesus can help them. But they're often happy to hear our stories about how He's helping us. If that's true (and we think it is), then we need to learn from Jesus and use stories that speak to the listeners—stories that tell of His affect on us. Then he who has ears to hear will hear.

If a co-worker asked you today to describe what Christ means in your life, what would you say? What part of Christ's work in your life would you describe in that moment?

Common Sense and Eternal Principles

- Many of the terms we use to describe our faith mean nothing to the people we encounter at work.
- We are responsible for finding ways to communicate the Gospel to our work culture; the Holy Spirit is responsible for the results.
- Jesus understood how to communicate, using stories that resonated with those in His circle. We need to do the same.
- Stories are the most effective way to communicate, and the story we know best is what Christ did/does for us.
- Our work culture, and even our church cultures, are becoming increasingly Biblically illiterate.
- People who don't have a relationship with Jesus Christ are not able to understand the deeper truths of Scripture.