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10 Principles for Witnessing to People in Non-Christian Faiths – Part 1

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Suwanee, Georgia, the small community where my wife and I live, is a microcosm of the increased diversity of modern America. Our dry-cleaner and his family are from India and are Hindus. The lady who sometimes cuts my hair is from Iran and is Muslim. Other stylists in the same shop are African American, Korean, Russian, and Kenyan. The owner of our favorite Chinese restaurant is a Buddhist.

It is no longer uncommon in our society to encounter people who are advocates and adherents of various cults and non-Christian world religions. Most world religions are growing in numbers in this country primarily due to increased immigration from Africa, the Middle East and Asia.

A few pseudo-Christian cults are also still growing by conversions and higher than average birth-rates. Around the corner from our house is a large ward (local congregation) chapel building of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons). The ward consists of many large families. Just down the street from there is the local Kingdom Hall of Jehovah's Witnesses who regular canvass the local neighborhoods distributing literature.

So then, how can we adequately meet the challenge of reaching so many people with non-Christian religious backgrounds or without even theistic worldviews? In this two-part article we explore ten basic principles for effectively witnessing to people of non-Christian world religions and cults.

1. Have a clear understanding of historic Christian doctrine and why we believe it is true.

Most evangelical Christians know what they believe about their faith. They know that Jesus Christ is their Lord and Savior, that He rose from the dead, and that they will go to heaven when they die. That's as it should be. However, most believers would have difficulty explaining why they believe what they do. It is vital that Christians know not just what they believe but why they believe it.

That is especially true if they are going to engage with people of other faiths. Starting with basic philosophical issues each believer can recognize the differences and truth claims of various worldviews. At MarketFaith Ministries that is our primary focus. But it cannot stop there, we must also be able to explain and defend our doctrinal tenets. Every church and pastor should take time to educate the congregation about these issues. We can no longer assume people will naturally accept what the Bible says and what we believe.

2. Focus particularly on biblical teachings about the nature of God, the person and work of Jesus Christ, the plan of salvation, and life after death.

Some religious groups are convinced their organization is the only one that is acceptable to God and that you must be a member in good standing to be saved. For instance, the Jehovah's Witnesses maintain that their corporation, the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, is Jehovah's only channel of truth to the world. If you are not an active member (one who is baptized, attends meetings at the Kingdom Hall, and goes door-to-door) you are in danger of being destroyed at Armageddon and annihilated at the final judgment.

Likewise, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) still maintains that it is the one true church on the face of the earth (though less vociferously than in the past). They claim that the true Church of Christ was lost from the earth in the 3rd century and restored by Joseph Smith, Jr., in 1830. Thus, all other Christian churches are apostate and cannot provide full salvation.

Other groups likewise argue they are the exclusive bodies of spiritual truth in the world. But what is the biblical perspective? Actually, no one organization can claim to have a corner on all spiritual truth and be the only source of salvation. The Bible teaches that the only fountain of truth and salvation is Jesus Christ. It is not a matter of which church people may join, whether they are baptized by a certain authority, or if they receive the Lord's Supper from the proper ecclesiastical agent. What they do with Jesus is all that ultimately matters.

In our witnessing encounters we must focus on the fact that salvation is entirely by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. A person must repent of her sin and put her faith in Jesus as her Lord and Savior. We must be careful not to get sidetracked by secondary issues when addressing unbelievers.

3. Take the initiative in the witnessing encounter and seek to develop a friendly relationship with the person in the religion or cult.

One of the first steps for reaching someone in another religion is to demonstrate a sincere desire to know them. We can start by asking about their families, jobs, country of origin (if applicable), personal interests, etc. Despite cultural and religious differences people often share common concerns and interests. Don't immediately challenge their religious beliefs or quote Bible verses to them. In many cases they have no knowledge of the Bible and never have discussed religion with anyone before. It is usually the best approach to develop a relationship with the person and gradually address the faith issue.

Also, especially when sharing with people in cults, always keep in mind that we are sharing Christ with a person, not just debating a movement's doctrine. It is easy to get caught in the trap of disputing theology but forgetting about the person.

4. Listen carefully to determine how committed the person is to the cult or religion and its teachings.

In recent years surveys have been taken about the religious self-identification of people in America. More than 75% of Americans still identify themselves as Christians. Those of us who are committed evangelicals look around and naturally ask, "Where are they all?" Let's face it, most people who call themselves Christians really do not have a saving relationship with Jesus Christ or attend church regularly. Even many who do attend church are relatively uninvolved in its programs.

The same is true of people who identify themselves as adherents of other faiths. Most people calling themselves Muslim probably are not actively practicing the faith. They rarely read the Qur'an, attend a mosque, or do the daily prayers. Even most Mormons are not "temple-worthy." That is, they are not faithfully practicing LDS teachings sufficiently to qualify to participate in the rituals of (or even enter) the church's sacred temples.

That being said, then, it is helpful in a witnessing relationship to know just how personally committed a person is to his or her self-professed faith. This is where inquiring and listening becomes crucial. We can discern the depths of a person's commitment by asking several simple questions: "What is your religious background?"; "What religious leader do you know most about?"; "When you go to church, where do you attend?"; "Who is the pastor (or other leader) there?"; "How often do you attend?"; "What would you say is the most important teaching of your faith?"

Usually people who are genuinely dedicated to a religious belief or movement will freely respond to those and similar questions. Some devotees, such as Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons, and Muslims, may even attempt to convince you their beliefs are true and try to convert you.

On the other hand, if a person is not willing or able to answer those questions with any degree of certainty you can assume she is not that committed to her religion. She may be ignorant of what her faith teaches or may not believe it very strongly.

Observing a person's behavior may also reveal his level of commitment. For instance, if you observe a Mormon drinking an alcoholic beverage you may assume he is not very dedicated to the church's teachings. The same is true with a Muslim who drinks alcohol or eats pork. Observant Jews do not eat pork and prefer kosher diets. Devoted Jehovah's Witnesses may drink alcohol but will not smoke tobacco products. Most dedicated Hindus do not eat meat of any kind. Look for these and other clues to a person's true depth of devotion.

5. Establish the sole authority of the Bible.

As we indicated earlier, many people from non-Christian religious backgrounds and worldviews have little or no knowledge of the Bible. Thus, we must begin witnessing to them by providing viable reasons to regard the Bible as historically accurate and theologically true. Sometimes we may need to discredit another faith's authoritative text such as Islam's Holy Qur'an. In those cases, Christian apologetics comes into play. Christians who desire to evangelize those from non-Christian religions need to study basic apologetics principles. Good apologetics books for laypeople are available by authors like Josh McDowell, Gary Habermas, Michael Licona, Lee Strobel, Ravi Zacharias, and C.S. Lewis.

Most pseudo-Christian cults and sects claim to believe and follow the Bible. Nonetheless, we must be aware of how they misuse it, often quoting verses out of context or using symbolic meanings. What's more, most cults have additional texts or leaders they regard as equal or superior in authority to the Bible. Mormons say they believe the Bible (King James Version), but they also have three additional canonical scriptures: The Book of Mormon; The Doctrine and Covenants; and The Pearl of Great Price. Their "Living Prophet, Seer and Revelator" (the current LDS President) trumps them all.

Jehovah's Witnesses do not claim any extra-biblical scriptures. However, they regard only the New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures (NWT) as accurate. It is the version published by the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society (WBTS) and is the only version they are allowed to study. Of course, the NWT is a terribly biased translation that obscures several key historic Christian doctrines, especially the deity of Christ and the Trinity. They also contend that the WBTS is the only valid interpreter of the Bible in the world.

These are five basic principles for evangelizing adherents of non-Christian religions. In our next installment we will examine five more important elements for effective witnessing to people of other faiths.

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