

Why Telling Your Story is NOT the Best Way to Share the Gospel

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Anyone who's ever taken a class on how to share their faith has heard some well-intentioned teacher say, "You don't need to learn a lot of big words. Just tell them your story. Just tell them how Jesus changed your life. No one can argue with that." Then everyone sighs a big sigh of relief because they thought they'd have to spend time learning how to answer hard questions. Questions like "How do you know Jesus rose from the dead?" Or "How do you know the Bible's inspired?"

I understand why this method of what we used to call "witnessing" is popular. Well-meaning pastors realize that people are scared to tell people about Jesus, and they want to find an easy method that they can use to teach their congregation how to share their faith without actually having to ask them to do anything – at least anything hard.

The problem with this method is that it doesn't work anymore. It might have worked 20 or 30 years ago, but in 2013 any post-modern worth his salt will respond "that may be true for you, but it's not true for me." And well he should. If the person sharing his faith is saying that you should try this because it worked for him – if he is basing his argument for following Christ on his own experience – then it's only fair that the person responding should be able to say that his experience is just as valid.

In a way, the Christian who uses only his own experience to tell non-Christians about Jesus is giving the post-modern the home-field advantage. He is implicitly agreeing that what

matters most is personal experience, not truth.

In her essay for *Come Let us Reason* (B&H Academic 2012), Toni Allen writes that women, especially, "tend to depend on their experience and emotional connection with God as the primary justification for the beliefs they hold."

Now, I'm the first person to say that the mountain-top experiences we have with God are amazing, mind-blowing, and unable to be described in mere words. And it is also often the experience of God that first draws us to Him, before we have any kind of knowledge to back it up. Many people experience God before they ever come into contact with the historical evidence for the resurrection .

But it is still just my (or your) feeling. I can tell another person what I've experienced, but I can't transfer that feeling to them as if I was exposing them to the flu. As Allen says "our experience may play an important role when sharing Christ with non-believers, but it may not provide the cogent force necessary to overcome intellectual barriers to faith."

Let’s put it this way: If I’m talking to a Buddhist who claims to have experienced Nirvana and I am only able to respond by describing my own experience of encountering Jesus, what differentiates my experience from his? Do I have any evidence that what I encountered was the one true God while his experience was just some kind of meditative high?

No.

And while we’re at it, how do I know that the transcendent experience I had while worshiping wasn’t just an emotional overload brought on by endorphins, chocolate, and looking at pictures of puppies or starving children. I can’t really even use the argument that I know Jesus is real because He’s changed my life. Lives can be changed by any number of things, including anti-depressants, hypnosis, twelve-step programs, and watching “What Not to Wear.”

Telling someone that all they have to do to effectively share the gospel is to tell the story of how Jesus changed their life is doing a disservice to Christians who want a robust understanding of why Christianity is true. And it can be damaging to the Christian with atheist friends who continue to challenge his faith.

Of course we need to tell our stories. Humans are storytellers by nature. It’s how we connect. It’s how we learn about each other and how we form communities. The problem is that in a post-modern context, one story does not correspond to truth any more than another.

While telling our story will often be the first thing we do when we begin sharing the gospel, it has to be backed up with good apologetics. “How do we know Christ was raised from the dead? How do we know the gospels are reliable? How do we know that the high we

get from singing repetitive worship choruses is any different from what a Muslim experiences at evening prayers?

These are the questions that apologetics answers. And no matter how much that well-meaning pastor wants to make talking about Jesus easy, it’s not. It’s not rocket science, but it does take a serious commitment to learning why we believe what we believe.

As Christians, we have truth on our side. Not the kind of truth that makes us arrogant (hopefully), but the kind of truth that corresponds with what is real. There are good arguments for the existence of God and good evidence that Jesus rose from the dead. There are logical, rational, winsome ways to demonstrate that Christianity is the best explanation for most of what goes on in the world, including why evil exists and why people suffer, but a million opportunities will be missed if we let post-modernism make the rules.

So the next time some well-meaning Christian tells you that all you have to do to share the gospel is to tell people your story, ask him how he knows it’s all true?

About Leslie Keeney

Leslie Keeney is getting her Masters of Philosophical Studies at Liberty University. She is interested in moral apologetics, and how myth, narrative, and pop culture can reveal the best of man’s universal moral intuition. She is both modern and post-modern (and the postmodern part means she’s OK with the paradox). Leslie lives in Lynchburg with her husband, two kids, and two cats. You can connect with her on Google+, Twitter, and Facebook. Leslie blogs at The Ruthless Monk.