

Effective Evangelism: JAE366

## WHAT COPS CAN TEACH CHRISTIANS ABOUT THE CRITICAL USE OF LANGUAGE

by Warner Wallace

This article first appeared in the Effective Evangelism column of the CHRISTIAN RESEARCH JOURNAL, volume 36, number 06 (2013). For further information or to subscribe to the CHRISTIAN RESEARCH JOURNAL go to: <http://www.equip.org/christian-research-journal/>

---

“Officer Stevenson, tell us what happened on October 20th at about 4:30 p.m.” The officer on the witness stand spoke directly into the microphone. He began to answer the prosecutor’s question without glancing at the jury. “I was dispatched to 1235 Westmont Street at approximately 1634 hours in response to a 415 Family. Once I was 97, I contacted the RP. She was concerned about the assailant being 5150. I requested the 10-20 of unit 503 and ran a 29 while I was waiting.”

Sitting at the prosecution table, I watched the facial expressions of the jury. I knew most of them had had no idea what Officer Stevenson said. The district attorney recognized the problem. “Can you try to say that in English, Officer Stevenson?” he asked.

“Sorry about that. I got the call from our radio dispatcher at about 4:34 p.m. The dispatcher told me there was a family disturbance of some kind at 1235 Westmont Street. When I got there, the woman who originally called us met me at the door and told me her boyfriend was violent. She was afraid he was mentally ill. I asked the dispatch operator for the location of the nearest additional police unit so I wouldn’t have to go into the house alone. While I waited for my back-up, I asked the dispatcher to run the woman’s boyfriend in our computer system to see if he had any warrants for his arrest.”

Stevenson’s first statement reminded me of some of my Christian police partners back when I was an obstinate atheist. There weren’t many outspoken Christians in my department, and the few I knew seemed to have a language all their own. I wasn’t raised in the church, and I didn’t become interested in Christianity until I was thirty-five, so I was unfamiliar with the words my friend Dennis used when he first talked to me about Christianity: “Jim, I’ve been convicted lately, and God has put you on my heart. God told me you need to be born again; you need to come to repentance and experience a conversion. It’s time for you to deal with the sin in your life and have a true spiritual rebirth. Why don’t you invite Jesus into your heart, and make Him the Lord of your life? If you have faith, you can be saved. You can be washed by the blood of the Lamb, and sanctified so you can enjoy fellowship with your Christian brethren.”

Dennis didn't actually put it quite like that, but he might as well have. I couldn't understand a thing he said. I had the same difficulty deciphering Dennis's "Christian talk" that Stevenson's jury had deciphering his "cop talk." I wish there had been a prosecutor with me at the time to ask Dennis, "Can you say that in English?"

As police officers, we often forget that our "professional language" sometimes alienates and creates suspicion in the very people we're trying to serve. When Officer Stevenson decided to address the jury instead of the prosecutor, he began to use *their* language. He "connected" with them and decreased their suspicion. If Dennis had tried to speak *my* language as a nonbeliever, he might have been able to connect with me as well. Instead his Christianese kindled my sarcastic distrust.

**"God has put you (or something) on my heart. / God told me."** Really? As an atheist, I was offended by this kind of language. What makes you Christians so sure you know what God is thinking? Are you actually hearing a voice from heaven? Does it sound like Morgan Freeman? Sounds a bit presumptuous to me. Try this instead: "Jim, I've been thinking about you a lot lately. You come to mind when I am praying and talking to God."

**"Be 'born again.' / Have a spiritual rebirth."** Is "born again" a political party, or something you want me to join? Aren't all Christians "born again?" If so, why are you using the additional adjective? Are "born agains" the true, hardcore Christians? Are they political activists, like the modern-day "birthers"? Sorry, I'm too busy to become a fanatic or join a movement. Try this instead: "Reconsider your beliefs, and begin a new life as a Christian."

**"You need to come to repentance. / Experience a conversion."** My mother used to take me to Catholic Mass occasionally when I was a small boy. I hated it. I never understood what those priests were saying, but I'm sure it had something to do with "penance," "penitence," or "repentance." Didn't King James die a long time ago? Why are we still trying to talk like him? Try this instead: "You and I might be 'good' at times but we're not 'perfect.' If God is all-powerful, He has the ability to be perfect. The only way imperfect creatures like you and me can be united to a perfect God is to accept the pardon He's offering for our imperfection."

**"Deal with your sin."** You go ahead and deal with your sin if you want to. I'm too busy dealing with everyone else's sin. I'm a police officer, for crying out loud; we're the "good guys." We put the "bad guys" in jail, and most of the folks I arrest tell me they're Christians. Please Mr. "Holier Than Thou," don't start talking to me about *my* "sin." It's offensive. Try this instead: "The Bible says Jesus is God *and* the only perfect man who ever lived. Yet He died like a common criminal to pay the price for our daily 'crimes' of imperfection. If we are willing to accept what Jesus did for us on the cross, He's willing to apply His perfection to us."

**“Invite Jesus into your heart.”** You mean, like a boyfriend? What exactly does that mean to have “Jesus in my heart?” I’m not an emotional kind of guy, so please don’t ask me to sing songs or hold hands with Jesus, especially in public. Do I have to emasculate myself to become a Christian? If so, thanks for reminding me why I’m not a Christian. Try this instead: “When we admit our imperfections, believe Jesus died on the cross to pay the price for our mistakes, and accept His sacrifice, we can start a new relationship with God.”

**“Make Jesus the Lord of your life.”** Isn’t this the twenty-first century? Are there still serfs and lords? Was J. R. R. Tolkien the author of your Scripture? What is a “Lord” anyway? Is it like a “slave master”? Between bosses and supervisors, most of us have enough people trying to be our “Lord.” Thanks anyway. Try this instead: “If Jesus is who He said He is, He deserves to be more than a sticker on your car or a slogan on your lips. That’s why He wants you to trust Him for everything. You’re already submitting your heart to something fleeting; God wants you to submit it to someone eternal.”

**“Have faith.”** If by “faith” you mean believing in something in spite of the evidence, no thanks. Blind faith is dangerous. I’m a cop; evidence matters to me. You can keep your “faith”; I’d rather have my “reason.” The world would be a better place if fewer people flew planes into buildings because they believed something blindly. Try this instead: “Jesus gave us more than enough evidence to believe what He said about Himself. He never asked people to take an irrational, blind leap. He asked instead for a reasonable step of trust.”

**“Be saved.”** Saved from what, and saved by whom? Last time I checked, I’m the guy who usually does the saving. And doesn’t your holy Book say, “God helps those who help themselves?” I’ve been helping myself for thirty-five years now without a problem. No need to change that. I’m OK, but thanks for the offer. Try this instead: “God doesn’t want anyone to be separated from Him. He’s given us a way home. All we have to do is accept His offer of forgiveness through Jesus.”

**“Be washed by the blood of the Lamb.”** Tell me you didn’t just say that. I know what a “blood bath” is, and it’s not usually a good thing. I’m not sure what a lamb has to do with it, but lamb’s not my favorite food anyway. Are you trying to get me excited about Christianity or chase me away? Try this instead: “The death of one perfect man (Jesus) provides forgiveness for the rest of us.”

**“Be sanctified.”** Is that kind of like “sanctimonious?” I know a lot of Christians who are smug and self-righteous. Is that what happens over time if I become a Christian? It certainly seems that way. “Sanctified” sounds a bit arrogant. I bet sanctified people think they’re pretty special. Try this instead: “Grateful people are selfless people. Christians who understand how much they’ve been forgiven are changed over time.”

**“Enjoy fellowship.”** What, another Lord of the Rings reference? Do you people ever use language from this century? Christianity sounds a lot like an exclusive country club. If I join, it sounds like I’ll get to become a “fellow” of some sort. Do I have to give up having a beer with the fellas in order to hang out with the Christian fellows? Hmm, that makes the decision easy for me. Try this instead: “It’s encouraging to find grateful Christians who are struggling to become people of God. We’re out there and eager to have you join our community, regardless of what you may believe today.”

In my ignorance, I misunderstood much of Dennis’s Christianese, and in my stubborn rebellion, I deliberately found many ways to misinterpret Dennis’s words. As a nonbeliever, I was like Stevenson’s jury: unfamiliar with technical language and somewhat suspicious about people who use it. I was rebellious enough without the added obstacle of language. Now, as a Christian myself, I try to remember the old Jim. When I talk to my unbelieving friends, I try to anticipate their rebellious objections, speak their language, and remember the limits of their theological training. Like Officer Stevenson, I’ve learned to pick my words carefully and put the needs of my jury ahead of my own preferences. —*J. Warner Wallace*

**J. Warner Wallace** is a cold-case detective in Los Angeles County, a Christian case maker at Stand to Reason, and the author of *Cold-Case Christianity* (David C. Cook, 2013).