

Effective Evangelism: JAE401

## EVANGELIZING THE CULTURAL CHRISTIAN

by Clay Jones

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While I was growing up in the 1960s, my father was a gambling womanizer, my mother was an astrologer into all things occult, I was a shoplifting rebellious punk, and together we attended the United Methodist Church.<sup>1</sup> If asked, all of us would have self-identified as Christians. We weren't Buddhists, after all! Our pastor, like many pastors especially of mainline Protestant denominations, didn't have a real relationship with Jesus and taught that if you lived a basically good life, then you would be saved. In grade school, I'd watch our pastor spout spiritual stories, read poetry, and sometimes weep over who knows what. He was clear about one thing: being born again was "old fashioned." Listening to him, I'd muse that I would rather be a garbage collector than a pastor.

Thankfully, my parents became "born-again" Christians while I was in junior high school, and they took me to a 1969 Billy Graham Crusade. Billy preached on heaven and hell that Sunday afternoon, and by the time he finished, I was convinced that I was going to hell. So I "went forward," and within a few months was devouring the Bible. This was during what was called the Jesus Movement. Soon, other "Jesus freaks" and I went witnessing to strangers in parks and at the beach, to fellow students in my high school, and door to door proclaiming the Good News. Our biggest obstacle in witnessing back then was that almost everyone would say, "I go to church; I'm a Christian." But we had a ready reply: "Going to church doesn't make you a Christian any more than standing in the garage makes you a car."

Although fewer self-identify as Christians today than did back then, a 2015 Pew survey of 35,000 Americans concluded that 70.6 percent of Americans still consider themselves Christians and a "clear majority (55%) of all U. S. Protestants" consider themselves "evangelicals."<sup>2</sup> A 2015 Lifeway study of 1,000 people concluded that three in ten Americans hold beliefs that would make them evangelicals.<sup>3</sup> Thus a majority of Americans already think they are Christians. The trouble is that mere assent to theological concepts doesn't mean that one is saved from his sins. A further problem is that over the past few decades, many (including

me) would get the person to whom we were “witnessing” to pray the Sinner’s Prayer, and then we would assure him that because he had prayed that prayer that he was now, in fact, born again and therefore saved. We even told him to never doubt his salvation. This confusion has continued, and many (who give Christian truth mere assent, and may have even prayed the Sinner’s Prayer) think they are Christians when they are not.

What can we do to evangelize cultural Christians?

First, we must ask the cultural Christian what he or she believes about Christianity and salvation. Do they believe Christianity is objectively true? What does it mean for them to consider themselves Christians? Solomon warned in Proverbs 18:13, “If one gives an answer before he hears, it is his folly and shame.” Cultural Christians may or may not believe many things that are true or false about Christianity. We need to tailor our response to their specific understanding.

Second, cultural Christians need to hear that Christianity is objectively true. It’s not just true for Christians but for everyone — whether they believe it is true or not. Many years ago, after I had taught that the resurrection of Jesus was an actual fact of history to a Bible study group I led, I was shocked to have a longtime attender and friend complain that I was making Christianity truer than other religions. It turned out that Christianity was true for him, but he didn’t think Christianity was any truer than Buddhism. Similarly, while secularly employed, I led a lunchtime discussion on C. S. Lewis’s, *The Screwtape Letters*. After meeting together for at least a couple of months, a late-twenties married woman was suddenly incredulous: “You don’t really believe there is an actual Devil, do you?” Cultural Christians must understand that there are good reasons to believe Christianity is objectively true — there really is a final judgment, and thus we had better get our lives in order. Thus apologetics is essential to evangelizing the cultural Christian.

In Acts 17:21, we are told that the “Athenians and the foreigners who lived there would spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new.”<sup>4</sup> This is symptomatic of thinking that no one religion was truer than any other. Thus they were content to hear Paul’s new religious ideas. But then Paul warned them that they needed to “repent. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead.”<sup>5</sup> When the people heard about this “proof,” some “mocked,” others wanted to hear more, but some others “joined him and believed” (vv. 33–34). That’s my experience proclaiming the resurrection fact to cultural Christians. Some are offended that we would say Christianity is objectively true, others want to hear more, but some positively accept that there is good news that saves.

Third, we often need to point out that the Sinner’s Prayer never has saved anyone. I used to cohost a call-in talk radio program. One day we said, “Our contention today is that no one has ever been saved by praying the Sinner’s Prayer in the history of Christianity. If you disagree with us, give us a call.” All five lines immediately lit up. The first bewildered caller asked, “You’re saying no one has ever been saved by praying the Sinner’s Prayer?” I said, “That’s right; the Sinner’s Prayer has never saved anyone in the history of Christianity—not even once.” I then asked, “For by grace you’ve been saved through...?” The caller paused and

asked meekly, "Faith?" I replied, "Right! Faith. You're saved by grace through faith. The prayer itself doesn't save you." I then pointed out that I'm not opposed to the Sinner's Prayer and that I hope to pray it with people in the future. But the prayer itself has no salvific power. Rather, the prayer is an expression of faith. It is a prayer of repentance and commitment to Jesus for one who has come to believe the gospel. Sadly, many Christians have said, as I used to say many years ago, "Pray this prayer and you'll be saved." As one Christian website states, "Pray this prayer, mean it, and you will be saved, right where you sit"<sup>6</sup> (emphasis in original). This has led many to regard the Sinner's Prayer as heaven's "Open Sesame" and has given many who don't have a sincere, ongoing faith in Jesus a false assurance of their salvation.

Fourth, we need to point out that true Christian belief always changes lives. A *profession* of believing that Christianity is true is a distant whimper from actually, sincerely believing what Jesus and His apostles taught. Those who believe will live changed lives. As philosopher Dallas Willard said, "We *always* 'live up to' (or 'down to': really, *right at*) our beliefs"<sup>7</sup> (emphasis in original). Indeed, many Christians quote only the first part of the Great Commission: "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." But the second half is what Dallas Willard called "The Great Omission" in a book of the same name: "and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you."

While counseling a "Christian" woman whose worldliness caused major marriage problems, I asked her if she ever actually had decided to *do* what Jesus had taught, and she replied that maybe she never had. I then encouraged her to rethink her relationship with Jesus and what it actually would mean to confess "Jesus is Lord." After all, Jesus said in Matthew 16:24, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me." This was new to her, and she decided that she would do what Jesus said. After that, she reconciled with her husband, and they are together today.

This is *not* about telling professing, yet worldly, Christians that they should live better lives. This is about challenging professing, yet nominal, Christians to examine whether they really believe what they say they believe. As Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 13:5, "Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves." Consider Martin Luther's Ninety-Five Theses, which he nailed to the Wittenberg door in 1517. Luther's first thesis was, "Our Lord and Master Jesus Christ...willed that the whole life of believers should be repentance." Repentance, of course, is a decision to stop sinning. Then in Thesis Three, Luther explained true repentance: "Yet it means not inward repentance only; nay, there is no inward repentance which does not outwardly work diverse mortifications of the flesh."<sup>8</sup> This isn't works righteousness. This recognizes reality. I believe in gravity, so I don't swim above waterfalls. I believe Jesus is Lord, so I strive to do what He says. We need to encourage cultural Christians to examine what their belief in Jesus really means to them or whether they really believe at all. —Clay Jones

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## NOTES

- 1 My intent isn't to single out the United Methodist Church or mainline Protestant denominations — many do teach sound doctrine, but many don't.
- 2 "America's Changing Religious Landscape," Pew Research Center, May 12, 2015; <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/>. Pew reported that 78.4 percent were Christians in 2007 and attributes this largely to a decrease of mainline Protestants and Catholics.
- 3 Bob Smietana, "What Is an Evangelical? Four Questions Offer New Definition," *Christianity Today*, November 12, 2015; <http://www.christianitytoday.com/gleanings/2015/november/what-is-evangelical-new-definition-nae-lifeway-research.html>.
- 4 Scripture quotations from the ESV unless noted.
- 5 17:31 NIV.
- 6 I suspect the author would point out that "mean it" means that the person has come to faith, but this wording is easily misinterpreted.
- 7 Dallas Willard, "The Faith of Unbelief," [DWillard.org](http://dwillard.org); <http://dwillard.org/articles/artview.asp?artID=27>.
- 8 Martin Luther, "Disputation of Doctor Martin Luther on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences," *Works of Martin Luther*, trans. and ed., Adolph Spaeth, L. D. Reed, Henry Eyster Jacobs, et. al. (Philadelphia: A. J. Holman, 1915), 1:29; <http://www.iclnet.org/pub/resources/text/wittenberg/luther/web/ninetyfive.html>.