

Things Christians Say (but shouldn't)

How Christian Clichés Show and Shape What We Really Believe.

by Todd Wilken

Apparently, Jesus would cut me off in traffic.

My blinker was on. Four lanes of bridge traffic were merging into one. Just as I nosed in, she accelerated beside me to close the space and deny me entrance. She must have been in a hurry.

After she cut me off, I saw it. Right there on her rear bumper, a Jesus fish. Inside the fish were the letters W-W-J-D. "What Would Jesus Do?" The irony.

I've also seen WWJD drivers speeding, running lights, road-raging and parking illegally in handicapped spaces. Jesus must have been hell on wheels.

Don't get me wrong. I've disregarded the rules of the road too. I spent a Saturday in traffic school to prove it. But I didn't blame it on Jesus. "What Would Jesus Do?" has done more harm than good, I suspect. It is but one of the many things Christians say, but shouldn't.

Out of the Abundance of the Heart...

Art Linkletter's House Party was on radio, then television for 25 years. Art had a segment called "Kids Say the Darndest Things" wherein children embarrassed their parents by answering Art's innocent questions. The kids simply spoke their minds. Funny stuff. The segment could have just as well been called, "Kids *Believe* the Darndest Things."

What a Christian says tells you what a Christian really believes. Whether we mean to or not, we betray our real beliefs by what we say.

And it works both ways. Not only do our words show what we believe, they also shape what we believe.

For example, take the word "conversion". Few Christians would question its use. Its Latin root, *convertere*, means "to turn, turn around, turn back". So far, so good.

In Scripture “conversion” goes hand in hand with repentance (Psalm 51:13; Isaiah 6:10; Acts 3:19; James 5:19). Repentance isn’t merely a change of habit, opinion or attitude. Repentance isn’t improving the self. Repentance is the death of the self.

But lately “conversion” has taken on a new meaning having very little to do with repentance. This new meaning has, in turn, shaped what Christians believe about conversion. Today, people “convert” the kid’s room into a home gym. No surprise, many Christians today believe conversion is spiritual and moral remodeling—move out the old furniture, change the wallpaper, a touch of paint—complete with the “before and after” testimony.

For good or for ill, words we use both show and shape what we believe. When we start thinking of a new way to say something, we usually end up saying something new. When we say something new, we usually end up believing something new.

This problem isn’t new. In his epistle, James took his readers to task for something they were saying:

Come now, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a city, spend a year there, buy and sell, and make a profit"; whereas you do not know what will happen tomorrow. For what is your life? It is even a vapor that appears for a little time and then vanishes away. Instead you ought to say, "If the Lord wills, we shall live and do this or that."¹

What’s the big deal? “We will” versus “if the Lord wills.” It seems kind of nit-picky, doesn’t it? But James knows that what Christians say shows and shapes what Christians believe.

Jesus says, “Out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks.”² It’s true. Our vocabulary and verbiage paint a picture of what we believe. That picture isn’t always pretty.

The J-Word

Christians usually avoid using four-letter words. But there is one four-letter word that peppers pop-Christian conversation: *Just*. The j-word is everywhere. You hear it in Christian preaching, teaching and singing.

When it comes to the singing, I blame the Gaithers. In 1972 Bill and Gloria Gaither wrote the song *Let’s Just Praise the Lord!* and it’s been downhill ever since:

*Let's just praise the Lord!
Praise the Lord!
Let's just lift our hearts to heaven
And praise the Lord.*

I don't know; it might have been whoever wrote *Just a Closer Walk with Thee*. In any case, today the j-word is everywhere in praise and worship music. It seems to be a permanent part of the Christian musical dialect.

What does the j-word mean? *Webster's New Twentieth Century Dictionary* defines the word: **just**, *adv.* 1. exactly, 2. almost, 3. only, no more than, 4. barely, 5. a very short time ago, 6. really (with an adjective).

So, when Bill and Gloria say, "Let's *just* praise the Lord," what are they asking us to do? *Exactly* praise the Lord? That doesn't make much sense. *Almost* praise the Lord? No. *Barely* praise the Lord? Certainly not. Praise the Lord *a very short time ago*? Not likely. *Really* praise the Lord? The grammar is wrong for that one. The only definition that makes any sense is "only". Let's *only* praise the Lord.

Why *only* praise? Have Christians neglected praise in favor of "non-praise" activities like confession, intercession, thanksgiving and supplication? It's *just* perplexing.

Even more perplexing is Christian use of the j-word in prayer. Dale Meyer has noticed it too and suggests an explanation:

It irritates me, spoils my prayers. "Dear Father, we just..." and then the prayer fills in whatever follows "just." "We just thank you for this day." "We just ask you to be with us." "We just want to praise you." I trust God's not bothered by it, but I am. I think it's the lack of eloquence. You're addressing your words to the great God of the universe, the One no sinner can behold and live. Not suggesting stiffness here, just a bit less casualness. I suspect the great pray-ers in the history of the Church did not use the word "just" the way people today like to throw it into every other sentence of a prayer.³

Is the j-word a thoughtless verbal placeholder, akin to the adolescent "like" or "you know"? Probably. But does the j-word prayer also betray what some Christians really believe about God and why He answers prayer? Perhaps.

J-word prayers echo with low expectations. "O God, we ask *for only this one thing*, nothing more." They also sound a little manipulative. "O God, if you *only* grant this one request, I'll never ask for anything again!" J-word prayers sound as though Christians think God is stingy; that we should be careful not to ask too much of Him. Now, if Christians don't really believe this, why do they pray as though they do?

Christian prayer isn't like the express line at the grocery store. God doesn't answer our prayers because we keep our requests to ten items or less. We don't have to nickel-and-dime God. We don't have to limit our prayers to just-this or just-that. The only j-word that belongs in our prayers is "Jesus". He is the reason God answers prayer.

Selling Books to Christians: the Gerund

In the same way the little adverb "just" has taken over Christian prayer, another, more obscure bit of grammar dominates Christian publishing. Here are a few examples of popular Christian book titles:

- *Becoming a Vessel God Can Use*
- *Choosing God's Best*
- *Descending into Greatness*
- *Experiencing God*
- *Flying Closer to the Flame*
- *Getting a Grip*
- *Having a Mary Heart in a Martha World*
- *Reaching for the Invisible God*
- *Strengthening Your Grip*
- *Transforming Your Church*
- *Unlocking the Evangelist Within*

Notice a pattern? It's the gerund. A gerund is a verb with an "ing" ending, used as a noun. For some reason, Christians love gerunds. "_____ing the _____" sells books.

If the gerund isn't in the title, it is often found in the subtitle: *The Prayer of Jabez: Breaking Through to the Abundant Life. Cure for the Common Life: Living in Your Sweet Spot. Approval Addiction: Overcoming Your Need to Please Everyone.* The list goes on.

These gerundified book titles are the latest incarnation of Be-All-You-Can-Be Christianity. It's Christianity as a program of self-improvement. Whatever you want to be, whatever your personal goals, Christianity can help. It's as simple as following the ten scriptural steps, using the seven spiritual principles or living the five biblical purposes. The Christian life becomes a to-do list of gerunds.

The problem here is three-fold. First, most of these books aren't really about the Christian life at all. They are about American middle-class angst. "I'm not becoming, overcoming, transforming or experiencing whatever I'm supposed to become, overcome, transform or experience!" Suburban stress replaces sin as the Christian's real problem. Second, these books prescribe works as the solution to the Christian's problem. The answer is found in what a Christian is *doing*, rather than what a Christian is *believing*. Therefore, third, after finishing one of these books, the reader comes to one of two conclusions. Either he concludes that he is doing the gerunds and is a really good Christian; or that he isn't doing the gerunds and may not be a Christian at all. In either case, he trusts himself and what he is doing, rather than Jesus has what He has done. And in either case, he probably runs right out and buys another book with a gerund in the title.

The "Person" in "Personal"

Do you have a "personal relationship" with Jesus? Or, is it really a personal relationship with yourself?

Let me tell you about my personal relationship with my wife. I think she's great. I asked her to marry me in 1985. I adore her. I worship the ground she walks on. She is the love of my life.

Have I told you anything about my wife? Not really. I've really only told you about myself. You know about me, what I think and feel; but you know nothing at all about my wife. Some relationship, huh?

This is what often happens when Christians talk about their "personal relationship" with Jesus. You hear all about the Christian, but very little about Christ. The Christian talks about himself, his feeling, and his experience. The "person" in the Christian's "personal" relationship turns out to be *himself*. Some relationship.

The next time a fellow Christian wants to talk to you about his personal relationship with Jesus, tell them, "Okay, but do it without talking about yourself." You might find that they have very little to say.

Any real personal relationship can only be described by talking about the other person. A real personal relationship with Jesus can only be described by talking about the person of Jesus.

Now let me tell you about my personal relationship with Jesus (it's kind of one-sided). He is God. He became man. He lived a perfect, sinless life. He suffered and died a perfect death. He rose from the dead. And He did all of this *for me, personally*. He baptized me. He feeds me with His body and blood. He forgives my sins. On the last day, He will come again and raise me from the dead. That's some relationship.

Jesus, Be My Valentine

If Christians aren't talking about their personal relationships with themselves, they are talking about their hearts. "I gave my heart to Jesus" or, "I invited Jesus into my heart". According to one version of Bill Bright's *Four Spiritual Laws*, some hearts even have furniture:

*Just to agree intellectually that Jesus Christ is the Son of God and that He died on the cross for our sins is not enough. Nor is it enough to have an emotional experience. We receive Jesus Christ by faith, as an act of the will. To be a Christian means that Christ is in your life, that He is seated on the throne of your heart.*⁴

The problem here is not with the "heart" language *per se*. Scripture talks about the heart; but not as a present one would be proud to give to Jesus:

*The Lord saw how great man's wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time.*⁵

*The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?*⁶

*Who can say, "I have kept my heart pure; I am clean and without sin"?*⁷

And Jesus, the would-be recipient of all these vile valentines, describes them in the darkest terms of all:

*For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lewdness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within and defile a man.*⁸

Another problem is that "I gave my heart to Jesus" gets the transaction completely backwards. In the novel *The Hammer of God*, the young pastor Fridfeldt proclaims, "I have given Him my heart!" An older and wiser Rector responds:

*One does not choose a Redeemer for oneself, you understand, nor give one's heart to Him. The heart is a rusty old can on a junk heap. A fine birthday gift, indeed! But a wonderful Lord passes by, and has mercy on the wretched tin can, sticks His walking cane through it and rescues it from the junk pile and takes it home with Him. That is how it is.*⁹

Finally, there is the problem of sheer subjectivity. As in the case of “my personal relationship,” the heart-Jesus is reduced to the Christian’s private, inner experience. The refrain of Alfred Ackley’s hymn *He Lives!* demonstrates how utterly subjective it can become:

*He lives, He lives, Christ Jesus lives today!
He walks with me and talks with me
along life’s narrow way.
He lives, He lives, salvation to impart!
You ask me how I know He lives?
He lives within my heart.*

But how do I know that little man living in my heart is really Jesus, and not a figment of my imagination? There’s no way to know for sure. And that’s the point. Christians shouldn’t go looking for Jesus in their own hearts. You never know what (or who) you’ll find there. Jesus never tells his disciples to look for Him in their hearts. Christians look for Jesus outside themselves, where He has *promised* to be found: in His Word and in His Sacraments.

Works, not Faith

Beware of ideas borrowed from Unitarians. “Deeds, not creeds” was a saying first popularized by the Unitarian Universalists. Later, it caught on within the ecumenical movement. Its latest champion is none other than Rick Warren.¹⁰

Warren finds “deeds, not creeds” appealing because he thinks it has the potential to unite otherwise divided Christians:

The first Reformation was about creeds; I think this one will be about deeds. I think the first one was about what the church believes; I think this one will be about what the church does. The first Reformation actually split Christianity into dozens and then hundreds of different segments. I think this one is actually going to bring them together. Now, you're never going to get Christians, of all their stripes and varieties, to agree on all of the different doctrinal disputes and things like that, but what I am seeing them agree on are the purposes of the church.¹¹

“Deeds, not creeds” should never be uttered by a Christian. For the Christian, a creed is simply a profession of faith in Jesus Christ. The Bible is full of creeds:

I believe that You are the Christ, the Son of God, who is to come into the world.... I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.... We believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved.... We believe that we shall also live with Him, knowing that Christ, having been raised from the dead, dies no more.... We believe that Jesus died and rose again.¹²

A creed is a profession of faith in Jesus Christ. So, try this: substitute the word "faith" for "creed", and the word "works" for "deeds" in Warren's statement above. *The first Reformation was about faith; I think this one will be about works.* Warren thinks that we need to work on works.

Now, Warren is half right. The first Reformation was about faith. The first reformation made it clear that God declares sinners righteous through Faith in Christ alone. But the first reformation was also about works. Namely, that faith produces works. Christians can work on works till the cows come home and not produce a single good work. Christians produce good works only when they trust Christ's work.

Would a new reformation of works complete what was left unfinished by the first reformation? Daniel Preus says no:

I would call those calls for a second reformation a call to renounce the reformation that God put into place through Luther and the other reformers in the 16th century. He [Warren] would return us to that doctrine against which Luther and the other reformers fought.¹³

The medieval Catholic Church invented "deeds, not creeds". They knew all about working on works. They had it down to a system.

Ironically, "deeds, not creeds" is a *creed*. It is a creed that dismisses Christian professions of faith as divisive and counterproductive to the Church's purpose. It is a creed that professes faith in deeds.

A Unitarian can say "deeds, not creeds" because he doesn't believe in anything to speak of. A Christian, by definition, believes in Jesus. A Unitarian can say "deeds, not creeds" because he thinks doctrine is a bad thing. A Christian knows that doctrine is good. A Unitarian can say "deeds, not creeds" because his deeds are all he has. A Christian believes that Jesus' deeds are all he needs.

A Church of, by and for Boomers

We come now to those Christian clichés most closely associated with my generation. There's a common theme; see if you can detect it:

- *The Church must change or die*
- *This isn't your grandfather's church*
- *A Church for this generation*
- *A new way of doing Church*
- *Reinventing Church*

- *God is still speaking*
- *God is doing a new thing*

We're the Boomers, we know better. For the Boomers, the Church's biggest problem is that it is the Church —and they are determined to change that.

Remember, this is the generation of perpetual adolescents, convinced that their parents (and grandparents) are either stupid, out of touch, or both. Instead of outgrowing their childish ways, they impose those ways on the rest of us. They insist on re-creating everything in their own image. They are forever fixing what isn't broken. Let's examine their clichés one at a time.

The Church must change or die. This is the ecclesiastical panic button. The Church is in mortal danger. Unless something is done immediately the Church is doomed. It's based on an evolutionary theory of the Church. The Church has survived only by changing and adapting to her environment.

But the Church doesn't operate according to the theory of evolution; the Church operates on the fact of the Resurrection. The Church lives because Jesus lives; the Church survives because Jesus cannot die. So there's no reason to panic.

This isn't your grandfather's church. In 1988 Oldsmobile introduced the advertising tag line, "This is not your father's Oldsmobile." Oldsmobile's goal was to appeal to a new generation by distancing itself from everything the company had stood for before. Rob Walker of Slate magazine observes:

*The problems with this, of course, were: a) It said what Olds wasn't, but not what it was, and b) it more or less informed a generation of Olds loyalists that their choice was now considered an embarrassment.*¹⁴

The ad campaign didn't only fail; it backfired. Walker writes: "This had the net effect not of reinventing the Olds brand identity but of carving it in stone."

Nevertheless, the Boomers in the Church couldn't resist. They added a generation, "This isn't your grandfather's church." This obvious attempt to distance the Church of today from the Church of the past is just funny. Funnier still is the fact that many of those saying, "This isn't your grandfather's church" are grandparents.

What was wrong with grandpa's Church anyway? Do we really want to tell a generation of Christians that they and their Church are an embarrassment?

The new way of doing Church. This one isn't even a complete sentence, therefore is ambiguous. Is it "The new way of doing Church is a good idea"? Or is it

"The new way of doing Church is a bad idea"? Maybe it's "The new way of doing Church is heresy." It's hard to tell.

What exactly does "doing Church" mean? Ah! There's the genius of this little phrase: it means whatever you want it to mean.

A Church for this generation. Like the previous three, this cliché is also based on the idea that the Church of yesterday is irrelevant today. But think about that idea. If it applies to different generations, wouldn't it also apply to different incomes, social standings and races? How about "a Church for the Rich" or "a Church for the Poor" or "a Church for White People"? Ridiculous, you say? Exactly.

Reinventing Church. Al Gore did it. Madonna has made a career of doing it. Hey, if they can do it, the Church can too.

This one says it all. The Church is a *human invention*. If we invented it, we can re-invent it. In fact, we must. Obsolescence is the enemy of every human invention. Human inventions are updated, upgraded and customized as the market demands.

Yes, yes, Jesus said, "I will build My Church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it." Jesus didn't understand the fickle fortunes of the marketplace. If we don't reinvent the Church, the forces of the market may succeed where the gates of hell have failed.

God is still speaking. This is actually the theme of the United Church of Christ's most recent advertising campaign. The tag line quotes the theological heavyweight, Gracie Allen: "Never place a period where God has placed a comma." This is the UCC's way of saying that God told them to support partial-birth abortion and perform same-sex marriages. It's a bit odd that a denomination that largely denies the authority of Scripture would suddenly start listening to what God is supposedly saying. Say good night, Gracie.

God is doing a new thing. This cliché has been used to justify everything in the Church from guitar solos to gay bishops. And isn't it funny how the "new thing" God wants to do always turns out to be exactly what the Boomers wanted to do? Oh, and by the way, if you stand in their way, you are opposing God Himself. Have a blessed day.

The good news is that the Boomers tyranny of change and hokey clichés can't last forever. The bad news is that it's far from over.

The Pattern of Sound Words...

All of these things that Christians say (but shouldn't) have one thing in common. None of them are found in the lexicon of Scripture. They are a foreign language —foreign to the way Scripture speaks. Christians should speak the Scriptural dialect. Scripture is our native language. Paul told Timothy:

*Hold fast the pattern of sound words which you have heard from me, in faith and love which are in Christ Jesus.*¹⁵

Paul knew that for good or for ill, words we use both show and shape what we believe. Paul knew that when we start thinking of a new way to say something, we usually end up saying something new. Paul knew that when we say something new, we usually end up believing something new. Paul knew that “the pattern of sound words” is sound because it constantly speaks of that “faith and love which are in Christ Jesus.”

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¹ James 4:13-15

² Matthew 12:34

³ Dale Meyer, “The Meyer Minute” August 8, 2006, daleameyer.com/August.htm

⁴ chialpha.ca/accept.htm

⁵ Genesis 6:5

⁶ Jeremiah 17:9

⁷ Proverbs 20:9

⁸ Mark 7:21-23

⁹ Bo Giertz, *The Hammer of God*, Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1960, p. 147

¹⁰ The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, “Myths of the Modern Mega-Church”, May 23 2005, Key West, Florida, pewforum.org/events/index.php?EventID=80. See also Trennis Henderson, “Rick Warren Challenges Baptists to Launch ‘New Reformation’” Associated Baptist Press, August 1 2005, www.abpnews.com/485.article

¹¹ The Pew Forum, “Myths of the Modern Mega-Church”

¹² John 11:27; acts 8:37; 15:11; Romans 6:8-9; 1 Thessalonians 4:14

¹³ Daniel Preus, Issues, Etc. radio program, “Is the Reformation Over?” December 7 2005, www.kfuo.org/ie_archive_dec05.htm

¹⁴ Rob Walker, "Oldsmobile: Victim of Its Own Brand" December 13 2000, www.slate.com/id/1006675/

¹⁵ 2 Timothy 1:13