

PRINCIPLE 1

Assume nothing

Many traditionally Christian countries, particularly in the Western world, have experienced a significant decline in church attendance this century and particularly since World War II. This decrease in attendance has led to a parallel decline in effective Christian understanding in these countries. That is, many who would nominally call themselves Christian have little or no understanding of the Christian gospel.

This may be illustrated from the situation in Australia, the country of origin of this course. For the last 200 years the Christian church has had almost unopposed freedom and opportunity in Australia. On a government census most Australians would, under 'religion', put down a Christian denomination.

But since World War II Australia has experienced an alarming decline in church affiliation. Television and Sunday sport, coupled with a hedonistic and affluent society, have been contributing factors to this decline.

- For instance weekly church attendance in 1955-1980 declined from 33% to 18.8% of the population. This figure of 18.8% is unbalanced by the fact that Catholic Church attendance is high, at about 40%. Among non-Catholic churches the real figure for regular church attendance is about 11% of the non-Catholic population. ¹ One writer comments that 'sample survey estimates may be over-optimistic'.²

- This fall is highlighted by the decline in Sunday School attendance. In one large denomination between 1954 and 1996, regular Sunday School attendance fell from 10% to 1% of the population. The national average for Sunday School attendance would appear to be less than 3% of all children.

- A government department recently carried out a survey of average regular church attendance in one of the capital cities of Australia. The result? About 2%

of the population over the age of 10 years were in church on a average Sunday.⁴

- As one writer has commented, 'It is no longer the case of the shepherd leaving the ninety-and-nine sheep safely in the fold while he looks for the one out on the hills. The ninety-and-nine are scattered, lost on the hills!'

The author recently took a husband and wife through this course 'Christianity Explained'. As they read the New Testament they asked questions like 'Who is Peter?', 'Who is this David?' and 'These Pharisees — are they goodies or baddies?' They represent typical modern post-war Australians, affluent, well educated but almost totally spiritually illiterate.

A world-wide problem

It is our observation that a similar decline has occurred in many other traditionally Christian countries, particularly those in the Western world. The penetration of gospel understanding into European communities, including the United Kingdom, seems to have waned significantly this century. The situation in New Zealand is very similar to that recorded in Australia. The U.S.A. seems to have been less affected by this slide, but there appear to be signs of an increasing nominalism even there.

What does this mean for evangelism?

In the past, we could often assume that people from traditionally Christian countries had, in their minds, a basic understanding of Jesus Christ and Bible stories. The job of the evangelist was to build on this platform of knowledge.

This is no longer true in many places of which Australia is a typical sample. It is our contention that, in evangelism today, we must begin from the *presupposition that the person you are addressing knows virtually nothing about*

Jesus, the Bible or the gospel. In the majority of cases, this presupposition will be correct.

For instance, crusade evangelism, which worked so well in Australia in the 1950's has become less effective with the passing of time. Not only has it become harder to get people to come out to such events, but even those who do make commitments still seem to have little idea of what they have done, or why they have taken this step.

Christianity Explained

In this course, 'Christianity Explained', the basic assumption is that the person you are talking through has *little or no* knowledge of Jesus Christ in any meaningful way. You should assume that he or she has never even opened the New Testament.

This does *not* mean, of course, that you are going to treat the enquirer in a childish or patronising way. It just means that you should not assume any prior knowledge.

In one particular area, this spiritual ignorance is chronic, both inside and outside the Church. This is the area of 'salvation by grace alone' or 'justification by faith'. In a recent group of eleven adults, all regular members of a reasonably vigorous church, all eleven said that 'a Christian is a person who tries to live a good life according to the Ten Commandments', or some associated answer. Between them they had collectively hundreds of years of church attendance and had listened to thousands of sermons and Bible readings!

Yet such an answer is not just a slight deviation from the truth, of say, five degrees. It is 180° off-course!

A good rule of thumb is this:

Assume that the person you are talking to understands nothing of the gospel until they can tell you, out of their own mouth, what it is.

This course, 'Christianity Explained', is based on the assumption that the person you are addressing is completely ignorant of Jesus, the Bible and the gospel - even if that person holds a responsible position in the church! In the course of your discussion you may discover that the person knows a bit more than nothing, and you can adjust your presentation

accordingly. But you can not assume it.

A wider application

Although this course has been designed for a traditional, yet declining, Christian culture, it is our belief that it has a wider use.

Because this course assumes no prior knowledge of the Christian gospel, it is a useful tool for evangelism in other situations as well - for people who have not been traditionally Christian or where primary first-time evangelism is being undertaken.

We would welcome guidance and help from evangelists, pastors and missionaries who are working in these situations. Our hope is that the course could be field-tested in a variety of cultures and then constructive suggestions fed back to us. This is already taking place in some countries, with good results.

- 1 Bruce Wilson, *Can God Survive in Australia?* (Albatross, 1983). Note especially pages 11-27.
- 2 Peter Kaldor, *Who Goes Where? Who Doesn't Care?* (Lancer Books, 1987). Note especially pages 15-27.
- 3 Wilson, *Can God Survive in Australia?*
- 4 John Hannaford, *Under a Southern Cross* (The House of Tabor, 1985), p.113.

PRINCIPLE 2

Proceed slowly

The dominance of ‘quick one-off’ evangelism

Since World War II one basic model has often dominated our thinking on the subject of evangelism, particularly in the traditionally Christian countries. We could call this model the ‘quick one-off’ approach to evangelism, or as one person whimsically calls it, ‘one-dump’ evangelism.

The quick one-off model comes in various forms, but it usually follows this pattern –

1. A summary presentation of the gospel:

A simplified summary of the message of the gospel will be presented to the enquirer(s). This may take the form of an address, as at an evangelistic rally; a memorised précis of the gospel presented to an individual; or the enquirer may be taken through a short tract which highlights the main points of the message.

2. A call to commitment: At the end of a presentation, lasting anywhere from a few minutes to a couple of hours, the enquirer is asked to respond to the gospel in some overt manner, i.e. put up hand, come down to the front, etc. The enquirer is then asked to pray...

3. A prayer of commitment: This prayer expresses a decision to follow Christ. So, quite often after an evangelistic rally, one will hear statements like ‘x people prayed the prayer.’

4. An assumption: Because the enquirer has ‘prayed the prayer’ it is usually assumed that (a) the person has become a Christian, and (b) the person now understands the Christian gospel. So this leads into...

5. A follow-up nurture course: The new convert is encouraged to participate in a nurture programme in which topics such

as Bible reading, prayer, assurance, church attendance, witnessing and giving will be taught.

What’s wrong with the quick one-off approach?

In many countries the quick one-off approach has served well in the past, and we need to praise God for those who have come to Christ through its use, and those who continue to do so. But it is our contention that this model has become less and less effective with the passing of time. The reason for this appears to have been the growing secularisation of many societies, as outlined in *Assume nothing* (page 9).

In many countries less than five percent of the population have even a Sunday school understanding of the gospel, Jesus or Bible stories.

Even those who have made decisions at evangelistic meetings seem to be ignorant of even basic gospel truths. The assumption made at point (4) above is often erroneous.

During an evangelistic crusade a colleague was able to speak to many of those who had made ‘salvation decisions’. He asked them all the well-known question:

Suppose you were to die tonight, and God said to you, ‘Why should I let you into my heaven?’ What would you reply?

In not one case over 14 nights was the enquirer able to give a reasonable, biblical answer to this question, however simply. In fact, any concept of trusting in the completed work of Christ as the only basis for acceptance with God was totally absent from their understanding. This was not the fault of the evangelist, whose addresses were usually powerful and biblically based. The ‘fault’ lay in the inability of the hearer to absorb the gospel in one quick presentation. It is not

surprising that the fall-off rate from such approaches is so high.

The simple gospel is not simple

Why is it that many people cannot understand even a simplified one-off presentation of the gospel? Let us try to understand the reason.

Recently, a group of Christians were asked:

Imagine you were to write a simple, short presentation of the Christian gospel; what biblical or theological concepts would you expect to be in it?

The answers came back something like this:

1. The character of God (creator, love)
2. Sin
3. God sent Jesus
4. His death for our sins
5. Resurrection
6. Repentance
7. Faith
8. Salvation by grace

The 'simple gospel' will usually contain most or all of these concepts. But remember, many today have virtually no understanding of the Christian message. So, using the quick one-off approach, we are giving a person who knows nothing at least eight brand new theological concepts to hear, understand, digest, and respond to, all in one brief presentation.

It is rather like taking an eight-course meal, heaping it all on to one plate and saying to someone, 'Eat that!' After one or two concepts, people get spiritual indigestion, and begin to make vague statements of assent, like 'Yes, that's right.' But, essentially, they do not understand what is being said.

Learning to teach the gospel

It is our contention that we need to move away from the quick one-off approach as our primary thrust in evangelism. There will be occasions when it will be appropriate, but in general it is becoming increasingly ineffective. We need to learn to *teach* enquirers the gospel and give them time to digest the content.

Christianity Explained seeks to provide one tool for teaching enquirers the gospel

over an extended period of time.

Evangelism in the New Testament

The evangelists in the New Testament appear to have been opportunistic, adapting their methods and, to a limited extent, their message, to each different situation. Consequently, there are examples which approach the quick one-off model, as in the case of the Philippian gaoler (Acts 16:25–34).

However, the evidence in general points to a more extended approach to evangelism. For example:

For three Sabbaths Paul reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that the Christ had to rise from the dead. Some of the Jews were persuaded.
(Acts 17:2-4)

So these words seem to explain the general pattern of evangelism in the New Testament: *reasoned, explained, proved, persuaded, argued, contended*. Mostly, the apostles and other evangelists do not seem to have practiced one-dump evangelism, calling for quick decisions. Quite often, it seems that they did not even ask for decisions. Those convicted asked the preacher!

What is *Christianity Explained*?

Christianity Explained is a six-unit presentation of the gospel which aims to fulfil this objective of teaching the fundamentals of the Christian faith. The course is based around the Gospel of Mark, which is chosen for its simplicity. The underlying assumption is that the enquirer knows virtually nothing about Jesus and the Bible.

It is an evangelistic course in that it seeks to lead the person to genuine faith and repentance by the end of the six sessions. It is a low-key approach in that there is no attempt to pressure or manipulate people into a commitment, though the need for a genuine faith-response is clearly and often put.

Each study in the series aims to teach only one point, that is, to hit only one target per lesson. Each unit is also evangelistic in its own right, so that at the end of each unit there is a call to respond to Jesus.

In the first three studies, the course builds

into the hearer's mind some basic knowledge about Jesus Christ and his finished work — that he is the Son of God, his death for our sins, and his physical resurrection. During the first three studies, the enquirer is encouraged to read progressively through Mark's Gospel. (From experience, most adults will do this 'homework'.)

In the remaining three studies we address the question:

How does the finished work of Jesus apply to me now?

Again, each study clarifies only one main teaching target per unit.

A word of balance

It should not be thought that this is to imply that we should give up all evangelistic enterprises which might be called quick one-off. We need a variety of approaches, as St. Paul says, 'that by all means we might win some'. Rather, this is a plea for a general trend or movement in evangelism away from the quick approach to a model in which we learn to teach the gospel.

The two models can actually go well together. For instance, at World Expo '88 in Brisbane, Australia, the two approaches were used in tandem. The 'Pavilion of Promise', a Christian pavilion at the Expo, presented crowds with a quick (45 minute) visual portrayal of the gospel. Those who responded after the presentation were followed up with *Christianity Explained*. In other words, the follow-up was EVANGELISM and not NURTURE.

Several evangelists are using this course as a second phase to their missions. In this way, the quick initial presentation plus the extended follow-up are regarded as a whole. This has proved to be a fruitful combination.

A practical example

Recently a well-known evangelist held a mission at a large suburban church. Instead of the traditional mission services, a creative approach was used:

- The church arranged as many small home meetings as possible. Christians were allowed to come only if they

brought a friend from outside the church. The evangelist spoke at each meeting, giving a condensed gospel presentation.

- At the end of each meeting there was no call for decisions, but people filled in a card similar to that shown on page 34 of this manual. Those who indicated response were invited to do a six-week *Christianity Explained* course. By the end of the mission over 100 non-Christians were doing *Christianity Explained*.

The quick one-off presentation and the teaching model were thus coupled together, and the two constituted the evangelistic enterprise. The follow-up was again EVANGELISM and not NURTURE.

As one involved person commented later, 'It was very effective'.

PRINCIPLE 3

Limited time commitment

Let us suppose you have a friend or relative whom you wish to influence for the gospel. One approach you could take is to invite the person to attend a Bible study group, where perhaps they will hear God's truth being taught. But there are a couple of problems with this approach.

1. The content

The section of the Bible which is being taught in the Bible study group may not be appropriate for a person who is not yet committed to Christ. For instance, your group may be studying the book of Job, which may be ideal for the level of maturity of the believers present. But a newcomer could sit through many studies on the life of Job, still without understanding the gospel. If the enquirer has the tenacity to stay in the group for a year or two he or she will possibly work it out in the long run. But many people will have dropped out before that time is up.

2. The commitment

Most Bible studies go on for months, even years. Now many people are not willing to make that kind of commitment to a 'religious' group, at least not in the initial stage.

When people are invited to do a *Christianity Explained* course, they are told that the course lasts for just six weeks. If they agree to such an invitation, they know they are making a limited time commitment. They know that if they do not enjoy the course, they will only have to endure it for six weeks!

It has been found from experience that a person who is not a convinced Christian is far more likely initially to agree to such a short-term commitment. After the course is finished, it is hoped that he or she will be more willing to continue in a regular nurture group, or similar programme.

You will see that a six-week follow-up

course is built into the programme, which the enquirers are invited to attend. Many times these groups have turned into on-going Bible study and support cells.

In a recent case, six people did the *Christianity Explained* course, and three of them became genuine believers. They are now in an on-going nurture group in which they regularly pray together, read the Bible and share personal details of their spiritual life. But at the beginning, they would have been incapable of doing these things, and would have been frightened off by the very suggestion. The group has since grown to seven members.

The three fears

Imagine that you are not a Christian and a friend asks you to do a *Christianity Explained* course, or to join a Bible study group. What fears do you think you might have about participating in such a group? There are at least three which we need to consider:

Fear no. 1: ANSWERING QUESTIONS

The greatest of all fears is that of being made to appear foolish in front of the rest of the group. People fear that they will be asked questions about the Bible or the Christian faith, and their ignorance will be exposed to ridicule. When they are being invited they need to be assured that this will not happen.

Fear no. 2: PRAYING ALOUD

People are very apprehensive that the group leader will say to them, 'Will you open the session with a prayer?' Again, when inviting people to attend, tell them also that they will not be asked to pray aloud.

In fact, it is strongly recommended that, when you are conducting the *Christianity Explained* lessons, you do not either open or close with prayers. The classes are a fact-finding exercise for non-Christians and, as such, public prayer seems inappropriate. You, of course, should pray for the group members at home, and encourage other Christians to support you in prayer.

Fear no. 3: READING ALOUD

Many people cannot, or do not wish to read the Bible aloud. Assure the person being invited that they will not be asked to do so.

THE INVITATION

When you are inviting a person to do the *Christianity Explained* course with you, assure him or her like this:

You will not be asked to pray or read the Bible aloud, and you will not be asked to answer questions. There will, however, be ample opportunity for discussion.

It is important that this point is made *with* the invitation, not later on.