

What Do Christians Talk About?

Not long ago, my church's youth ministry had a thank-you dinner for all of the volunteers who helped out the previous school year. The theme was Japanese. One couple showed up at my table wearing authentic, traditional Japanese attire, including white socks and geta sandals. They recognized me and my date from the Veteran's Day dance held earlier that year by the church. They had been impressed with how well we danced together, and asked us where we learned to dance.

After some talk about where we learned to dance and our experiences dancing, the conversation moved on to our military lives, something I had in common with this couple. From there, they talked about their time in Japan and finally we all talked about our children. By now, perhaps 45 minutes or more had passed and the conversation took a pregnant pause. Another person at the table began to ask everyone else which program they had volunteered for. I was the only one there who worked with the high schoolers. I was thanked for working with such a "difficult" group, and asked why I chose it.

I took the opportunity to do some apologetics. I told them that I went with the high schoolers because they are the group in most danger. I told them 80% of the teens will leave the Church for at least a year between the ages of 18 and 22, and that most of them will never come back. I mentioned that Protestants do slightly better, with "only" 67% leaving during that time. I also went on to tell them that the interesting thing is that most of them are not angry with the Church, and most of them do intend to come back "someday." I took a brief tangent to offer some hope, by telling them that only 15% of them become skeptics, whereas Muslims expect 55% to do so. So the Church is at least imprinting them with a strong spiritual ethic, but is failing to imprint a strong practical ethic.

The real problem, it seems, is that while being religious is an important part of their lives, it is only one of many parts. In other words, Christianity is just one of many things to do in life, not life itself. As long as children look at going to Church as something to do, the Church will always be in conflict with the world. Now, in some sense the Church very much is in conflict with the world. In the context that the Church seeks life and the world races to death, this conflict will never go away and must be fought at every step. But we must destroy the unspoken but cancerous notion that what is said in Church must stay in Church. We can't keep the children in the Church forever; they must wander into the world at some point. And it is best that we teach them how to find God outside the Church campus.

I admitted that I had no absolute answers, although I don't see how any failed efforts based on my ideas could make the situation any worse than it is. One idea I have is based on an observation I have made about my own life, and I shared it with them. I noticed that when I went to college, the people I was with talked about learning. When I joined a Tae Kwon Do class, the people I was with talked about self-defense. In the military, we talked about how to fight and survive in combat. In my various engineering jobs, we talked about building things. But when I am with fellow Christians, we talk about ourselves. Perhaps we discuss how orthodox we are, but this is invariably either about what we did for the church or in response to something the clergy said.

When I was done with this short monologue, the gentleman who earlier asked where I learned to dance then asked me, "So, what do Christians talk about when we get together?" I responded that we talk about dancing, life in the military, living in Japan and what age group of children we like to teach.

I'm not exactly sure why Christians don't want to talk about Christianity. I know that this topic,

along with politics and relationships, is something I was told as a child to not discuss in polite company. And there are certainly situations when such talk is not appropriate. But when a group of Christians get-together at a Christian function, not only should it be appropriate, but it should be the purpose of the get together in the first place. Personally, I find it easy to talk about Christianity. God is not the Church part of life, He *is* life. Nothing we do, no place we see, no subject of interest we learn is separated from God. It *is* God. Not in the pantheistic sense where God is what makes up reality, but in the sense that an artist is considered part of his painting. When I drive home and see some car pulled over, stopping to help them isn't just one of many things to do that day, it is a chance to meet Jesus, because Jesus told us he is the stranger we meet in need. I don't think many people have a problem relating to this, as it is simple and obvious. But life is complex, and always looking for simple answers will inevitably fail. And no institution in the history of the world has come up with better answers to life's complexity than Jesus and those who honestly study Him.

I was with a group of teens one night and the talk was loosely based on how to act like a Christian when at college. One teen suggested that if one was given the choice between going to a party or studying, then one should always study. While his heart was clearly in the right place, he, through no fault of his own, had the overly simplistic approach I just warned about above. Perhaps he will actually follow his own advice when that day comes, but what about so many others? And what happens when they stay in the dorm to study and their friends who went out to party actually do better on the test? Faith certainly needs to be tested, but this sounds too much like setting them up to fail ("They tie up heavy burdens and lay them on people's shoulders, but they will not lift a finger to move them" (Matthew 23:4) comes to mind.)

So, I asked him about the Theological and Cardinal Virtues. He remembered all but two of them, but didn't understand how they applied to what he just said. This is an excellent example of what I am seeking to fix. The Church clearly did a good job teaching this knowledge to this group of teens, but it was equally obvious that the Church failed to show them how to apply it to life off of Church grounds. I then talked him through the virtues. I began by telling him that "justice" means everyone's dignity needs to be respected, including his. His countenance changed slightly. He was still lost but understood that he might be able to have fun in college after all. Then I told him that certainly the prudent thing to do is to get good grades, so there is not much to see there. But then I asked him about temperance; how much studying was necessary to keep the grades up? His eyes lit up, as he knew he should not have to study every single night to do this. Then I reminded him of fortitude, which means that we *do* have to act on whatever answer temperance gives us here. Now he understood (at least as far as college parties go), that Christianity is not a "ball and chain" to keep one from having fun, it is a practical tool to help us make the most out of life.

There are those, I know, who would accuse me of "diluting" the faith by suggesting that one can only have faith if there is no benefit from it. I find this attitude simply appalling. How can we honestly call God the "Father" if we are not to learn about life from Him? Is everything the Bible teaches us about fatherhood a lie? And far from diluting one's faith, it should be expected that someone will have more faith in a system that works than in a system that does not.

This is one of untold millions of examples that could be explored. Christianity is not simple. If it were, it would have died out a long time ago as it would have been found useless in the complex world we live in. We do a grave disservice to ourselves and to our young adults to pretend it is simple. No one person can have all the answers. We need to exchange ideas and perspectives of Christian life to help each other out when dealing with the complexities of life.

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