

## **“Overcoming our Aversion to the ‘W’ Word”**

**Matthew 3:1–12**

**Dr. Christopher C. F. Chapman**

**First Baptist Church, Raleigh**

**December 4, 2022**

Two stories illustrate why we have an aversion to the “w” word, that is — witness. The first is a story of friends in Danville, Virginia. They became a part of the church I served and in recent years have gone into ministry. So, these are not people who are opposed to faith talk. But before they came to us, they visited another church in town. The following Wednesday night, a couple from that church showed up with their young child, not to say they were glad our friends visited, but to witness to them and teach their child how to witness.

They began by saying, “Imagine you walk out your front door tomorrow morning and get hit by a bus. It could happen, you know! How certain are you that you will end up in heaven?” Our friends didn’t remember much after that because they tuned out — partly because they lived in a corner apartment, they could not have been hit by a bus there; and partly because the conversation offended them, it was a canned approach with scripted questions and no real interest in them.

The second story is included in an article in the December 2022 issue of *Christianity Today* (pp. 34-43). In March 2002, just after U2 performed at halftime of the Super Bowl, Billy Graham expressed a desire to offer a blessing to the band. Only Bono could go, Franklin Graham picked him up at the airport, and the following is Bono’s recollection of their conversation in the car.

“You...you really love the Lord?”

“Yep.”

“Okay, you do. Are you saved?”

“Yep, and saving.”

He doesn’t laugh. No laugh.

“Have you given your life? Do you know Jesus Christ as your personal Savior?”

“Oh, I know Jesus Christ, and I try not to *use* him just as my personal Savior. But, you know, yes.”

“Why aren’t your songs, um, Christian songs?”

“They are!”

“Oh, well, some of them are.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, why don’t they... Why don’t we *know* they’re Christian songs?”

I said, “There’re all coming from a place, Franklin. Look around you. Look at the creation, look at the trees, look at the sky, look at these kinds of verdant hills. They don’t have a sign up that says, ‘Praise the Lord’ or ‘I belong to Jesus.’ They just give glory to Jesus.”

There is much more to the article, but the recounting of this conversation alone is fascinating. It reflects a certain approach to evangelism or witnessing that may grow out of a genuine desire to do the right thing. But it uses catchphrases and formulas that are off-putting, it makes assumptions about people while showing little interest in getting to know them. And thus, it is the very kind of faith talk that is turning many people against the church and sadly Jesus as well.

These stories illustrate why many of us have an aversion to witnessing, and yet, we have a calling to give witness to our faith. It’s in Luke 24, Acts 1, and many other places in scripture. And in a world where so much faith talk turns people off, faithful witness is even more desperately needed. But how do we overcome our aversion to this habit of faith, especially in this sacred season when we have ample opportunities to talk about Jesus and his birth?

Perhaps we begin by jettisoning the baggage of examples even we find offensive and examining the biblical *witness*, double entendre intended, what people in scripture do. First and foremost, they tell others about their experience with Jesus. There is no canned approach, no formula of faith to be imposed, no assumptions made about the other’s spiritual condition or the need to extract a confession as if faith is

a sales transaction. There is only a willingness, indeed a strong desire, to share a wonderful thing with others. The woman at the well, the man born blind, and the list goes on and on — when people in scripture are transformed by Jesus, they tell others what they have experienced.

We need only think about what a witness is asked to do in a courtroom. One can only give testimony to what one has seen or heard, experienced personally in some way. There is such a thing as an expert witness, but even that person speaks to personal knowledge about some specific subject matter. I have noted before a rabbi's facetious critique of the legal oath — to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. No one knows the whole truth, the rabbi says, which is true, but this oath only pertains to what the person testifying knows about the matter in question. Such is our calling as witnesses to Christ's love.

The Dream Team has noted the dependence of the proposed mission statement for the church on Randall Lolley's daily prayer — to be a faithful witness to the presence of Christ in my life. That simple phrase expresses well the personal nature of witness. We can only speak to what we know personally — the presence of Christ in our lives. None of us has God or Jesus in our pocket to give to someone else. We can only share our story of faith, tell others about what we have experienced.

That's what biblical witnessing is, and it is something we can all do. Our stories share some common threads, but they have differences too. I did not grow up in church, as many of you know, I wandered in as a teenager and found acceptance and direction in a youth group. My experience is different from the experience of many of you who grew up in church, and that's okay. We each bring a specific perspective to our experience. That is what we share, not a generic, prepackaged message.

Another thing people in scripture do, in addition to sharing their personal experience, is point others toward Jesus. This is what John the Baptist does in our reading from Matthew, this story that shows up every Advent. John's preaching may seem out of place as we prepare for the birth of Jesus, but his story and Jesus' are intertwined. He is preparing the way for Jesus by calling people to repentance, in fulfillment of prophecy. But he is also making clear the contrast between Jesus and

himself. He says, “I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.”

In the crucifixion scene on the Isenheim Altarpiece, John the Baptist stands to the left of Jesus, accompanied by a lamb who symbolizes Christ’s sacrifice on the cross. As John stands there, he points to Jesus. His finger is drawn in a prominent way. This image captures the focus of his entire life – not to draw attention to himself, but to point the way to Jesus. That is the focus of biblical witness.

I have often said that if a person’s pre-conversion story sounds more exciting than their post-conversion story, something isn’t right. The same can be said if in our witness, the focus is upon us rather than what God-in-Christ has done for us. When the woman at the well seeks to tell others about Jesus, what does she say? “Come and see a man who has told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?” In other words, “Come and see for yourself!” She points the way to Jesus. So should we.

There is one other thing scripture tells us about faithful witness – it is lived as much as it is spoken. In the *Christianity Today* article I have referenced, Bono talks about a way forward through all the divisiveness of this time, and he expresses hope for the church, but he insists that it depends on our actions. More specifically, it depends on addressing our hypocrisy, the disconnect between our words and deeds.

Many people resonate with the gospel’s teachings about love and kindness, grace and compassion, help for the poor and the stranger. But then, they see people not living up to any of this, expressing hatred and judgment, treating the needy with indifference. The dissonance between words and deeds drives them away. “We have to have hope that people will live their faith,” Bono says, “rather than just preach it. We *have* to preach it. If you’re a preacher, preach it. But if you can’t live it, stop.”

When John the Baptist prepares the way for Jesus, he calls for more than the proper use of words. He calls for a different manner of life. He calls for repentance, a radical reorientation of life shaped by the nearness of God’s realm in Jesus. And as New Testament scholar

Stanley Saunders says in his commentary on Matthew 3, “For Christians, repentance is not a religious moment or experience in which we ‘come to God,’ but then continue to live within the social narratives and structures that constitute life as usual. Repentance is a perpetual state of readiness to challenge our commonplaces, the myths we live by, which produce not the fruit of repentance, but the practices of alienation and violence we too easily take for granted ([workingpreacher.org](http://workingpreacher.org)).”

To live faithfully and demonstrate the authenticity of our verbal witness, we need to embrace this ongoing process of transformation. I think of the agnostic journalist who, on his deathbed, was being witnessed to by a friend who was a minister. When the friend finally came up for air, the journalist said, “Are you are talking about Christian faith, life lived according to the teachings of Jesus. I’m all for it! When does it begin?” That’s what many people want to know. Our verbal witness matters, it is much needed, but our actions are needed more.

In the realm of off-putting witness, I remember a woman who came into my athletic store in Louisville nearly forty years ago. She started to lecture me about not taking Christ out of Christmas when I made what she thought as an “x” before “mas” on her receipt. I told her I was a seminary student and minister. What I wrote was a Greek chi, the first letter in Christ. But rather than being encouraged, she seemed irritated. Her purpose, I surmised, was not to hold up Jesus in word or spirit but to point out the wrongs of others.

In the realm of inviting witness, I think about the wonder of Toy Joy. It is not a shot in the dark or a feel-good moment for us. It grows out of the ongoing work of the clothing ministry wherein we get to know people and come to care about them. The Christ whose birth we celebrate is all over the ministry, and sometimes we talk about Jesus, but even when we don’t, his compassion flows through every toy, gift card, stocking, and conversation. I have no aversion to that kind of witness, nor does a world full of people who need to hear it and see it, experience it in the depths of their souls.