

Snippets from my doctoral dissertation on evangelism – feel free to quote me or use this information for your own personal giggling - LJR

I have observed in my own life and in the lives of others during more the three decades in church ministry settings that personal reluctance to engage people in conversation about Christ or Christianity is increasing because of fear of rejection or, and fear of offending the very person one desires to reach for God.

In *Evangelism That Works*, George Barna writes that “Most Christians believe (incorrectly) that evangelism is meant to happen primarily during the Sunday morning worship. Amazingly, just one-third of all adults contend that they personally have any responsibilities or obligation to share their religious views with other people.”¹

Barna also notes that the fear of being seen as ‘annoying’ is a reason most Christians are reluctant to witness:

Given that more than 80 million adults contend that being on the receiving end of an evangelistic pitch is “annoying” and knowing that several million born-again Christians refuse to describe themselves as born again for fear of becoming social outcasts, many churches and Christians have chosen to “soft-sell” the gospel. The result has been a rise in keeping religion private. Increasingly, Christians and non-Christians alike opt for a nation in which people are free to practice their religion as long as it is done in secret (or quietly).²

However, the perception that talking about matters of faith is unwelcomed by those without faith may be inaccurate. In *Holy Conversation*, Richard Peace writes, “For years now, religion (Christianity included) has lived on the margins of culture. People were not much interested. But all that began to change in the 1990s. Suddenly spirituality

¹ George Barna, *Evangelism That Works* (Ventura: Regal Books, 1995), 22 –23.

² *Ibid.*, 24.

was all the rage. Interest has continued unabated ever since.”³ After discussing the eagerness of people to talk about God after seeing certain films, Pearce draws this conclusion: “In the forty years or so I have been engaged in the ministry of evangelism, I have never encountered such openness to the gospel. *People want to talk about God. And we need to be part of that conversation* (emphasis by author).”⁴

The major reason why Christians engage in evangelistic conversation so infrequently, then, may lie not in the reluctance of others to talk about faith issues, but in the reluctance of the Christian to initiate such conversation! Mark Bechtle in *Evangelism for the Rest of Us* writes, “Fear has always been a factor in evangelism. Most people are hesitant to confront people about personal issues...The issues that make us avoid speaking in public are the same issues we face in evangelism: being the focus of attention, wondering how we’re being perceived, saying the wrong things and being embarrassed, and risking rejection for what we say.”⁵

In my own life, I have discovered that people are usually willing to engage in such conversation once a Christian is brave enough to turn a conversation to spiritual things. I believe that one way to overcome the fear of being ‘annoying’ is to learn to engage people in conversation about less ‘threatening’ topics, and then steer the conversation naturally to matters of faith. I tested this in a series of conversations with students at Alma College in Alma, Michigan, just after the release of the first movie of *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, and discovered how easy it was to move from discussing the movie to discussing the Christian faith.

³ Richard Pearce, *Holy Conversation: Talking About God in Everyday Life* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2006), 13.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁵ Mike Bechtle, *Evangelism for the Rest of Us: Sharing Christ within Your Personality Style* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2006), 77.

(here was a section describing the project itself – far too boring for me to share it)

Biblical Teaching

The last words recorded by Matthew from Jesus are: “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, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age (Matt 28:19-20 NIV).” These verses establish the mandate for evangelism, but not the method. The process laid out in this foundational passage simply spells out the goal--an act of commitment to Christ (baptism) followed by the lifelong process of discipleship. The discipleship process requires that the convert receive instruction in the commands of Christ from those more mature in the faith, and then obeys Christ’s commands. Conversion to Christ is only a first step, but it is a necessary first step.

It is that moment of actually bringing up the subject of faith ‘out of the blue’ that seems to bring all the fears about witnessing to the forefront, and keeps many Christians from witnessing at all. In my experience, it is much easier to transition to a conversation about faith from a conversation about something in which the other person is already interested. Using topics of current interest and then bridging to spiritual truth is something Jesus did often. In Luke, Jesus uses the recent tragedy of a collapsed tower to challenge listeners to evaluate their own lives: “Or those eighteen who died when the

tower in Siloam fell on them—do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish (Luke 14:4-5).” In fact, no matter how minor or mundane that Jesus could not use it as a launching pad into deep teaching. When tax collectors seeking the payment of the temple tax accosted Peter, Jesus used that issue to teach the disciples about their identity as sons of the king (Matt 17:24-27). Jesus used the sight of a withered fig tree he had cursed to initiate a teaching about the power of prayer (Mark 11:20-25). Jesus was watching people as they made their offerings in the temple, noticed a widow throwing in two small coins, and used two small coins as a conversation starter about stewardship (Mark 12:41-44). Soon after, as the disciples looked up in awe at the elaborate temple building, Jesus said, “Do you see all these great buildings? Not one stone here will be left upon another; every one will be thrown down (Mark 13:2).”

Jesus was always looking for points of common interest, so he could teach from the known to the unknown, using common ground. In Luke 13:1-2, Jesus went from the news of massacred Galileans to the need of the crowd to repent. If it was a topic of interest to His audience, Jesus could use it as a starting point for conversation. In Luke 14:7-11, the sight of wedding guests choosing seats according to rank and privilege prompted a discourse on the wisdom of humility. Even Jesus’ parables usually were based on scenes common to the life lived by the hearers, such as the parable of the sower and the seed in Matthew 13.

Just as Jesus used topics of current interest and then bridged to spiritual truth, so did Paul. Paul would look for clues to topics of interest to his audience, and then use them as starting points to initiate discussions of spiritual significance. For instance, in Athens, he noticed a particular altar amongst the many, and when challenged at the Areopagus about his strange teaching, he began, “Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of

worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you (Acts 17:22b-23).” Paul began with the known, and then taught new content.

Peter also stressed personal readiness to converse about matters of faith, and the need to take advantage of opportunities that do arise. Peter says, “Who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good? But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed. ‘Do not fear what they fear; do not be frightened.’ But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect... (I Pet 3:13-16).” Paul says, similarly, “And pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ, for which I am in chains. Pray that I may proclaim it clearly, as I should. Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone (Col 4:3-6).” Both Peter and Paul stress not only clarity and gentleness in conversation with non-believers, but also urgency. We cannot let the personal fear of embarrassment cause us to pass up the opportunity to turn a conversation to matters of spiritual significance.

Paul goes so far as to say,

Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God’s law but am under Christ’s law), so as to win those not having the law. To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings. (1 Cor 9:19-23).

While remaining obedient to Christ's law, Paul did modify his behavior in order to be in relationship with those he wanted to win for Christ; this included being observant enough of the contemporary culture that he could go from matters of secular interest to matters of spiritual interest in the same conversation. Being able to use something of great secular interest, such as a popular Hollywood film, to enter into a conversation of spiritual significance, is one way for us to do so as well.

Evangelistic Thought

Many authors in the field of evangelism wrestle with how to help people initiate conversation about the gospel. For the gospel to be shared in conversation, conversations must first occur, and then be directed into topics that allow the meaningful sharing of the good news about Jesus. However, there seems to be no New Testament mandate for how to start a conversation about Christ, nor even mandated content. Because there is no clear direction, people often choose awkward or abrupt entries into such conversation. Leighton Ford's classic *Good News is for Sharing* points out: "Most people are turned off by the person who buttonholes them with the 'Brother, are you saved?'" (although God can use that sometimes, too!). I find that almost everyone I have ever talked with has been willing and often eager to talk about spiritual things if he can do it in a non-threatening situation."⁶

Ford discusses how effective witnessing requires both the existence of a relationship and the use of language. He laments the fact that many Christians have few, if any, remaining relationships with those not yet Christian, and therefore, few opportunities to discuss Christ in a meaningful way: "Meaningful contact is the first step in building a bridge to these people. Do as Jesus did: make friendships with non-

⁶ Leighton Ford, *Good News is for Sharing* (Elgin: David C. Cook, 1977), 17–18.

Christians.”⁷ This means discovering things we share in common: “But the common interest does not have to be religious...Certainly they need to know that God is the hub of our lives. But they also need to know that the rim of our lives touches the real world.”⁸

This does not include compromise of our Christian lifestyle: “In seeking common ground, we have no right to be dishonest, to pretend interests that we don’t have, to do things against our Christian standards, or to use tactics that make people think we like them, only to drop them if they don’t respond.”⁹

Barna emphasizes the significance of a meaningful personal relationship in witnessing: “Although it is true that nearly half of all adults indicate they become annoyed when someone tries to share religious beliefs with them, we have also discovered that when those same annoyed individuals have an evangelistic conversation with a family member, close friend or trusted associate, they are not annoyed. Depending on the state of mind or point of spiritual quest of the nonbeliever, the person may even express gratitude for the interest shown in them.”¹⁰

Ford notes that effective witnessing is more than simply living one’s life in a quality way: “Sharing our faith always involves speaking in some way, just as it always means a total relationship involving more than just saying words...So we have to understand where people are and, if necessary, interpret and translate our message in terms and ideas they can grasp.”¹¹ Noting that Jesus’ primary message was “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand”, Ford writes that Jesus chose his words carefully:

⁷ Ibid., 109.

⁸ Ibid., 111.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Barna, *Evangelism that Works*, 72.

¹¹ Ford, *Good News is for Sharing*, 88.

“Jesus was using what modern communication experts call an ‘adaptive orientation.’ This simply means that he communicated with people at the point of their felt needs in terms they could understand. To Nicodemus the ruler, he said, ‘You must be born again’—he never used ‘born again,’ a highly conceptual metaphor, in any other recorded instance in the New Testament. He talked to the woman by the well about living water.”¹²

Evangelism, then, involves being in relationship and engaging in conversation using words and concepts that are meaningful to the hearer. This is why teaching pastors about pre-evangelistic conversation and encouraging pastors to model the ways such conversations can be initiated is so important.

Steering a conversation onto a spiritually significant topic, or the art of conversational bridging, is something Ford discusses: “A crucial need in sharing our faith is being relevant to people. I don’t mean that we make the gospel relevant. The gospel is relevant. But sometimes we aren’t. Just as Jesus did, we have to start where people are and lead them to where God wants them to be. We need to start with what is contemporary and move to biblical truth.”¹³ Ford summarizes: “For many people, the greatest problem in conversing about Christ comes at two points: the beginning and the end. We don’t know how to introduce faith into our conversation in a natural way, and we don’t know how to conclude by actually inviting someone to open his life to Christ.”¹⁴ This is why most lay people would benefit by having their pastor teach and model how to initiate evangelistic conversations, and how to assess how and when such conversations should end.

¹² Ibid., 90.

¹³ Ibid., 91.

¹⁴ Ibid., 119.

Mike Bechtle in *Evangelism for the Rest of Us* points out that initiating conversations of any kind, let alone conversations about faith, is even more difficult for introverts than extroverts: “For the extrovert personality, the implications for evangelism are obvious. Extroverts are not afraid to speak up, so they approach people easily...They are outspoken and take risks in conversations, they are not afraid to talk about tough issues.”¹⁵ Introverts, then, are reluctant to initiate conversation or steer conversations to potentially intrusive topics. Everyone could use help in identifying conversational bridges from areas of common interest to matters of spiritual importance, but for introverts, this kind of assistance would be even more helpful.

Bechtle also discusses the idea that, to be evangelism, a conversation must take a person through the complete plan of salvation, “using appropriate verses to support a point-by-point description of God’s plan for that person’s life. But I never found that in Scripture. Even Jesus himself answered people’s questions and made statements that got them thinking. But there’s not a lot of evidence to that he made a start-to-finish presentation of the gospel...The biblical model of evangelism is primarily a process, not an event. The pattern involves meeting people at their level, and moving them along a notch or two in their spiritual journey.”¹⁶

Evangelism theorist James Engel would agree. In his comprehensive study of the spiritual decision process, he identifies at least eight stages in the process leading up to actual regeneration. These stages are the movement from no faith in a supreme being to faith that a supreme being exists, to some knowledge of the gospel, to knowledge of the fundamentals of the gospel, to a grasp of the personal implications of the gospel, to a

¹⁵ Bechtle, *Evangelism for the Rest of Us*, 47 –48.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 52 –53.

positive attitude toward the act of becoming a Christian, to problem recognition and the intention to act, to the decision to act, and finally to repentance and faith in Christ.¹⁷

Richard Peace also sees movement toward faith happening in stages, saying, “each person has his or her own issues to deal with before he or she can get to the question of Jesus. For some it is proof or plausibility that God exists. For others, it has to do with the demands of the gospel. For still others, the issue is whether God is a force or a person. Some have to wrestle with what went wrong in their prior religious experience, while others have to try to match up their views of spirituality with what Scripture teaches us about God and how to meet Jesus. So holy conversation takes place around these personal issues.”¹⁸ Many pastors fail to realize how uncomfortable their people may feel when faced with a possible evangelistic conversation, and need to teach and model how natural these conversations could be. They also need to teach about these stages in the conversion process, so that lay people don’t feel that every possible evangelistic conversation is an all-or-nothing challenge. The pressure such a perspective puts on a layperson is so great that it can render one mute with anxiety. The conversation never starts.

A conversation simply needs to help a person move from one stage to the next to be described as evangelistic or at least pre-evangelistic. Conversations about movies that all participants have seen can easily become pre-evangelistic conversations when the content of the movies include themes such as the existence of God, an identifiable Christian character, implications of personal faith or the lack thereof, or personal problem recognition. One simply needs to ask what the other(s) think about a particular scene or issue in the film to get into a conversation. Engel points out that Jesus himself did not

¹⁷ Engel, *Contemporary Christian Communications: Its Theory and Practice*, 83.

¹⁸ Peace, *Holy Conversation: Talking about God in Everyday Life*, 29.

limit himself to one-way presentations of the complete gospel. Jesus “asked questions, listened, probed, reasoned and dialogued...part of Jesus’ method was to take the person from the known and familiar to the unknown through use of metaphors and parables – symbols with which all were familiar or illustrations from real life.”¹⁹ Most of the American population sees at least one movie per year, and most are aware of the releases of major motion pictures. This shared awareness supplies a massive reservoir of shared metaphors and images to use in evangelistic conversations.

Bechtel suggests that we observe how Jesus engaged in conversation: “As he wandered along the dusty roads, he built object lessons around the common situations he encountered—fig trees, fields ready to harvest, a restless sea.”²⁰ He thinks conversations about faith can become easier, more effective and more enjoyable, even for introverts, as one develops familiarity with matters cared about by non-believers; so he encourages reading the front page of each newspaper section each day, observing the details of shared environments, asking people about their families, developing hobbies and joining interesting organizations.²¹ Surely, movies that have entered the mainstream of shared experiences could serve as the subject matter for safe conversation; movies that address any of Engel’s stages in moving toward salvation (existence of God, awareness of personal needs, etc) would lend themselves to turning the conversation to matters of spiritual significance.

Peace talks about the character of those conversations themselves, coining the term “holy conversation” as a subset of “meaningful conversation”. He writes that meaningful conversations have a give and take that engages both partners, deal with

¹⁹Engel, *Contemporary Christian Communications: Its Theory and Practice*, 60.

²⁰ Bechtel, *Evangelism for the Rest of Us*, 101.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 139 –140.

matters of consequence, need not produce a winner or a loser, can stop and start and go on for months, deepen friendships and change both participants. He goes on, “holy conversation is simply vigorous, ongoing, good-hearted conversation around the whole topic of God and how to bring God into our lives in a life-changing way.”²² However, holy conversations do have one required component: “Holy conversation is about *holy* issues. It’s not random conversation, but it’s about the meaning of life, the nature of reality and the existence of God. It’s conversation with a focus. In fact, the *content* of the conversation sets holy conversation apart from other conversations. For Christians the focus of holy conversation is Jesus: who he is, what he has done, how he brings us back to life, how to connect with Jesus.”²³

There are certainly many sources of shared metaphors and images to use to engage in evangelistic conversations, not just those from movies. However, movies are so full of imagery and storylines that could provide easy transitions to ‘holy conversations’ that they must be taken seriously in this light. Robert Johnson writes, “as society’s major means of telling its stories, movies have become a type of lingua franca. Who doesn’t know the story of *Titanic* (1997)? Think of the millions of children who have seen *The Lion King* (1994). When one goes to a party and must make conversation with new people, is it not a recent movie that provides the smile of recognition and the conversation starter?”²⁴

Clive Marsh and Gaye Ortiz write that the theological formation of millions of people is already profoundly impacted by movies: “millions of people watch films. Christians are among them. The thinking of Christians (their theology) is thus in part

²² Peace, *Holy Conversation: Talking about God in Everyday Life*, 18.

²³ *Ibid.*, 111 –112.

²⁴ Robert J. Johnson, *Reel Spirituality: Theology and Film in Dialogue* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 24.

informed by their cinemagoing and video-viewing. And the theological, religious, and ideological viewpoints of those who would not wish to call themselves Christian are likewise in part influenced by movie-watching. Theological discussion is therefore stimulated by this worldly activity whether churches like it or not.”²⁵ The intent of their book is to help ministers support people in their discovery of the value of the Christian faith through the use of the theology embedded in film. Pastors have a weekly opportunity to point out the gospel elements in contemporary movies to not only help their own people think theologically about what they have seen, but to also be alerted to opportunities to use those elements in easy conversation. The illustrations in the Pastor’s Guide supplied with this project will help pastors try this out, so the approach can be tested.

Of course, churches have not always had a positive view on using movies in this way or in any way. In relating the history of that attitude of the churches toward movies, Johnson identifies five discrete stances of the church, even today. In film’s infancy, there was an uncritical acceptance of film by the churches as Hollywood seemed to reinforce religious morality. During the Roaring Twenties, however, Hollywood excesses led to a rejection of Hollywood by the churches, which adopted the ‘avoidance’ stance which survives to this day.²⁶ Some churches still recommend total avoidance of film-viewing, especially for Christian leaders. More common, though, is selective avoidance based on content or subject matter judged morally objectionable.

A still more common attitude among contemporary conservative Christians is that of caution. Because of television, televised movies, and movie rentals, abstinence is no longer a viable strategy. As early as 1974, the president of InterVarsity Press, Donald

²⁵ Clive Marsh and Gaye Ortiz, ed., *Exploration in Theology and Film: Movies and Meaning* (Maiden: Blackwell Publishers, Ltd., 1997), 1 –2.

²⁶ Johnson, *Reel Spirituality: Theology and Film in Dialogue* , 43.

Drew, said, “It is my conviction that a Christian, providing his foundations are firm, should see films and become involved in the arts and other forms of knowledge. The Lordship of God in Christ must be seen to extend to all areas of life.”²⁷ The Christian viewer can watch movies, but should do so with care, and from a clearly defined and religious stance.

After viewing a movie, Christians as well as non-Christians benefit by assessing the story they have experienced in thoughtful discussion with others as well as internal dialogue with their own belief system. This kind of critique is essential when looking for points of contact within a movie with the gospel; in fact, the very struggle to do so in conversation with others can lead to lively, and holy, discussion. Bryan Stone, in *Faith and Film: Theological Themes in the Cinema*, writes, “The worldview and values propagated by the cinema—however subtly or implicitly this may occur—must be critiqued through a posture of constructive engagement rather than silent standoff. And this critique must be rigorous and extended far beyond the narrow scope of values and behaviors typically critiqued by standard rating systems...”²⁸

For the purpose of using movies as a source of shared experience to use in engaging in evangelistic conversation, some mixture of caution needs to be observed. There are some films in which the message is so repugnant that that it would be counter-productive to use in conversation about Christ. Most films, though, have identifiable contact points with the gospel if one knows how to look. One source is to think through the points in the story which aroused in the viewer that sense of awe akin to the high moments of worship services. Film is especially adept at creating those moments of wonder and awe. David John Graham relates: “The experiential dimension of watching a

²⁷ Ibid.,45.

²⁸ Bryan P. Stone, *Faith and Film: Theological Themes at the Cinema* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2000), 6.

film, which can be close to an existential experience, can mimic or stimulate the existential dimension of religious experience...I will never forget seeing *Schindler's List* for the first time. After three hours of quite harrowing viewing, I walked out of the cinema with the two friends I had gone with. There was complete silence between us, almost all the way as we drove home. The experience had been like being in the presence of something awesome."²⁹ Once conversation began, the experience itself provided a natural entry into a discussion about the nature and presence of God. In a similar way, Jesus used the disciple's awe when viewing the Temple to initiate a discussion about his own impending death and resurrection (Mark 13:2). When one has the desire to engage in evangelistic conversation, one can recognize teachable moments and take advantage of a more natural entry into a conversation about Christ.

Another way to think through points of contact with the gospel is through the elements of story-telling. Every story has a structure. Every film has a story. Joseph Campbell wrote *Hero with a Thousand Faces* to show how the structure of story-telling, especially myth, transcends cultural difference. For example, common elements of story include the hero's struggle with, and then acceptance of the challenge or call; followed by a departure from normal routines, and a passage into dark trials, often of the soul. There are the struggles of solving the challenge, and the discovery of strength and resources within oneself and from others. Lastly there is the return from the challenge and reintegration into normal life, which can produce its own challenges!³⁰ Campbell's insight into myth structure helps one see these structures in film storylines and even in the gospel.

²⁹ Marsh and Ortiz, *Explorations in Theology and Film*, 36.

³⁰ Joseph Campbell. *Hero with a Thousand Faces*, 2nd Ed. (New York: Bollingen Foundation, 1968), 36.

In a more contemporary treatment of Campbell's work on story structure, Christopher Vogler identifies twelve common elements in story and then shows how they are present in contemporary literature and film in *The Writer's Journey*. He identifies the twelve stages of the hero's journey as: (1) Ordinary World, (2) Call to Adventure, (3) Refusal of the Call, (4) Meeting with the Mentor, (5) Crossing the First Threshold, (6) Tests, Allies and Enemies, (7) Approach to the Inmost Cave, (8) Ordeal, (9) Reward, (10) The Road Back, (11) Resurrection and (12) Return with the Elixir.³¹ Vogler takes each stage, divides it into sub-stages and illustrates each with examples from contemporary story. Again, with an understanding of basic story structure, points of contact between the gospel and a particular story are easier to identify. For instance, in the final phase, the hero brings back something of value to the community (sometimes just the solving of the problem) and the community itself has to adjust. Similarly, the gospel story includes the very human reactions and responses of the first church to the remembered truth about the sacrifice and resurrection of Jesus.

Stuart Voytilla takes a different approach. In *Myth and the Movies*, he shows how the storytelling structure plays out in each of fifty major movies, in the genres of action-adventure, western, horror, thriller, war, drama, romance, romantic comedy, comedy, and science fiction. He wrote "to provide a flexible, analytical tool to understand why *any* movie's story works or fails. But most important, the paradigm guides us to an understanding of why a story resonates on a universal level by answering our deepest mysteries."³² When we understand story structure, it is easier for us to identify why a

³¹ Christopher Vogler, *The Writer's Journey*, 2nd Ed. (Studio City: Michael Wise Productions, 1998), 14.

³² Stuart Voytilla, *Myth and the Movies: Discovering the Mythic Structure of 50 Unforgettable Films* (Studio City: Michael Wise Productions, 1999), 1.

particular scene in a film touches us, and to identify the part of the gospel story with which it corresponds.

Yet another way to become adept at seeing a movie's points of contact with the gospel is to read the books of those whose ministry is now identifying them for others. For instance, Bryan Stone's *Faith and Film: Theological Themes at the Cinema* takes each phrase of the Apostle's Creed and discusses it, using a prominent film. For example, he discusses the phrase 'the forgiveness of sins' through the movie *Dead Man Walking*: "One of the most profound links between the New Testament and *Dead Man Walking* is their portrayals of the intricate relationship between the act of forgiving and the act of receiving forgiveness."³³ At the end of each chapter he provides sample questions that could lead into holy conversation, such as: "Is it really possible, especially for victims and families of victims, to forgive someone like Matthew Poncelot?"³⁴ *Videos That Teach*, by Doug Fields and Eddie James, identifies clips from 75 movies and provides a brief lesson plan from each movie for use with teenagers. The authors provide background and sample questions "launch meaningful discussions that go beyond the surface of the scripts to kids' spirits, discussions that get kids talking about themselves and life and God."³⁵

Summary

Theorists writing in the field of evangelism realize the difficulty of initiating conversations that could lead to witnessing due to fear of rejection and the desire not to be perceived as annoying. However, when approached properly, most people are still

³³ Stone, *Faith and Film: Theological Themes at the Cinema*, 171.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 175.

³⁵ Doug Fields and Eddie James, *Videos that Teach: Teachable Movie Moments from 75 Modern Film Classics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 19.

willing to discuss their personal spirituality and issues of spiritual significance, especially when this is done in the context of a currently significant issue and a continuing relationship. Even if conversation does not lead to a decision to trust Christ, since most people arrive at that point through many stages, conversation that could help someone along that process is extremely important and worthy. Shared experiences and knowledge serve well as points at which to initiate discussion. Most Americans are aware of, or have actually seen, most major films, either at the cinema or at home on TV. These films can provide contact points with the gospel, especially when analyzed according to the internal structure of story-telling.

(I have excised the remainder of the dissertation, though you may have it all upon request. Following is the pastor's Guide that I wrote for ministers to use back when the movies of THE LORD OF THE RINGS were 'hot'. You may find useable sermon illustrations here. If you use one, you need not cite me as the origin)

Appendix A

PASTOR'S GUIDE TO THE LORD OF THE RINGS

A Resource for Fellow Pastors who Love
“The Lord of the Rings”

by
Rev. Larry J. Ross

Preface

I was just 16 years old when a friend of mine insisted I go to my high school library and check out *The Lord of the Rings*. Reading it was like falling through a hole into a real world of hobbits and orcs, wizards and elves. For three decades, I have read the trilogy at least once per year, as well as continuing to read widely in the genre.

At the same time I was reading *the Lord of the Rings*, I was also becoming a Christian, and discovering a call to the ministry. In every church I served, people have been surprised and delighted that my life, like theirs, has been enriched by the fertile soil of Middle-earth.

Ministry for me has always included a passion for proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ by whatever means possible. When I heard that New Line Cinema was filming *The Lord of The Rings*, I was sure that the movies would spark a new surge of interest in Tolkien's masterpiece. I began to wonder if the movies and the written trilogy could be used to some advantage for the Gospel. This Pastor's Guide is the result of that interest. As part of a Doctor of Ministry program, I have developed this guide to assist pastors in using *The Lord of the Rings* as a means to help their people learn to initiate conversations about Christ by using the common ground of Tolkien's story.

I have always used stories from the culture around me to make my preaching connect with real life. Like most pastors, I work hard to gather illustrations that enrich my preaching. By identifying illustrations gleaned from the Christian underpinnings of Tolkien's writing, I hope to help pastors in their preaching, and help their people to see how easily one can go from a conversation about *The Lord of the Rings* to a conversation about Christ. May this guide be helpful to my fellow pastors!

Larry J. Ross

Sept. 15, 2003

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The Problem of Reluctance to Engage in Witnessing

One of the greatest joys of my three decades of active ministry has been to discover and equip people who are eager to tell others about their faith in Jesus Christ. Unfortunately, their numbers have been relatively few. I have seen estimates that only about 10% of believers have the spiritual gift of evangelism. For the rest of us, the responsibility to tell others about Jesus Christ can elicit varying levels of fear and reluctance, and even lead to shame and guilt.

Jesus said to His disciples, "I will send you the Counselor—the Spirit of truth. He will come to you from the Father and will tell you all about me. And you must also tell others about me...(John 15:26.)" Paul wrote "...how can they believe if they have not heard? How can they hear if there is no one to tell them? (Rom 10:14)." Further, the words of Jesus in Mark 8:38 include, "If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of Man be ashamed..." That's enough to put any believer in a battle between obedience and shame in the struggle to do personal evangelism!

Daniel Owens in *Sharing Christ When You Feel You Can't* identifies three reasons that lay people fear attempting verbal witness: fear of failure, fear of rejection, and fear of their own lack of skill. Although Acts 1:8 promises power to be witnesses for Christ, people still fear failure. Owens writes, "We often make witnessing, the sharing of our faith, more difficult than it needs to be. It's time we stopped putting pressure on ourselves, thinking we must lead some

person to Christ. Instead, we should relax and let the Holy Spirit work through us, asking, 'To whom do You want me to be a light? To whom do you want me to be a witness?' and leave the results up to the Lord." Pastors can be helpful by reminding people in their care that it is God, not them, who is responsible for bringing others to Christ.

Pastors can also be helpful by easing people's fears about rejection. George Barna released a study in June, 2003, available on his website www.barna.org, in which he revealed that four out of ten adults discuss religious matters during the week, and that, even among atheists and agnostics, one out of every three (32%) talks about faith related matters during the week. It is not true, therefore, that faith-related matters are a forbidden topic in contemporary America. Many Christians, however, 'hesitate to build bridges to others because we are afraid we will be rejected. Often when we share our faith, we feel that people see us as strange ducks or fanatics or something equally odd," says Owens.

He also writes that a concern over lack of skill inhibits witness. "...we are afraid we just don't have the skill for it. Not many of us have gone to seminary or received formal biblical training. Because we think we don't know much about the Bible, we are afraid to open our mouths and tell people about Jesus. We think, *'If someone asks me a question to which I don't know the answer, how will I respond? I won't know what to say.'*" Owens reminds us that our own stories are wonderful tools for witness. John 9:25 tells of the blind man who, when healed, could not explain the theological truths of his healing, but could say, "One thing I do know. I was blind but now I see!" Christians can say, "I may not know all about the Bible or have all the answers, but this one thing I do know: God changed my life, and I am no longer the person I once was."

Using Contemporary Culture for Pre-evangelism

If fear is one of main reasons people do not risk talking about their faith to non-Christians, then it may be possible for pastors to encourage witnessing by helping people work through their fears. Barna, in the previously cited study, that discloses that four out of ten adults

discuss religious matters during the week, also shows that two-thirds of American adults talk about the content of movies or television programs during a week!

Paul the Apostle taught, in 1 Corinthians 9:19, “Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible.” He goes on to talk about how he becomes part of the culture of those he seeks to reach in order to establish common ground, and be able to witness effectively. Verses 22 –23 summarize his approach: “...I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some. I do this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share its blessings.”

The establishment of common ground, in the context of a personal relationship, allows for topics of conversation to emerge that can lead naturally to the sharing of the gospel. Pastors use sermon illustrations from contemporary culture to lead into the sharing of Biblical truth, and to illuminate its application. Lay people can be shown how to identify things from the contemporary culture that can be discussed without fear of rejection, and then become launching points into conversations about Christ.

Terry Wardle writes in *One to One: A Practical Guide to Friendship Evangelism*, “By focusing on common interests, we can establish bridges of trust. In time the message of salvation will cross from one heart to the other. This is the foundation of effective evangelism: establishing a Christian presence with non- Christian friends and neighbors.”

Using *The Lord of the Rings* for Pre-evangelism

Even though J.R.R.Tolkien did not write *The Lord of the Rings* as a Christian allegory, his own profoundly Christian world-view bubbled up as he wrote and resulted in a story well-suited for use in pre-evangelistic conversation. The popularity of the movies *The Fellowship of the Ring* (Dec. 2001) and *The Two Towers* (Dec.2002) is a strong echo of the book’s impact on the world. Tom Shippey makes the case in his book *J.R.R.Tolkien: Author of*

the Century that *The Lord of the Rings* is the greatest book not merely of the century but of the millennium.

Gracia Fay Ellwood's book '*Good News from Tolkien's Middle Earth*' carefully lays out how five major characters in the story are Christ-figures. Tom Bombadil, Frodo, Sam, Gandalf and Aragorn each illustrate a particular aspect of Jesus Christ. Bombadil is the first Adam, Frodo is the Suffering Servant, Gandalf is the Victor over Death, and Aragorn is the Coming King. Kurt Bruner and Jim Ware in *Finding God in the Lord of the Rings* present 22 Christian themes found in *The Lord of the Rings*. Similarly, Mark Eddy Smith in *Tolkien's Ordinary Virtues: Exploring the Spiritual Themes of the Lord of the Rings* also presents devotional thoughts based on Tolkien's work.

Clyde Kilby writes in *Tolkien and the Silmarillion* that Tolkien himself recognized the Christian underpinnings in his own story: "Not long after I began my work with Professor Tolkien, he and Mrs. Tolkien went away for a short vacation, during which he sent me a paper called 'Kingship, Priesthood, and Prophecy in *The Lord of the Rings*,' written by a professor in New South Wales. This paper proposed that Tolkien's story was one of the most misunderstood works of modern fiction because its critics were so often unacquainted with the Bible. The writer insisted that the story is based on the manner of Christ's redemption of the world. Middle-earth is saved, he argued, through the priestly self-sacrifice of the hobbit Frodo, 'the Lamb whose only real strength is his capacity to make an offering of himself.' It is saved also by the wisdom of Gandalf, 'the major prophet figure,' as well as by the mastery of Aragorn, who begins despised and ends as King. As each agent responds to his 'calling', he grows in power and grace... "Tolkien wrote me his own opinion: 'Much of this is true enough—except of course, the general impression given (almost irresistibly in articles having this analytical approach, whether by Christians or not) that I had any such 'schema' in my conscious mind before or during the writing.'" No doubt Tolkien would have agreed with C.S.Lewis' conclusion that the deeper meaning of a story must rise from the writer's lifetime spiritual roots rather than be consciously inserted.

How to do it: Sermon Illustrations from *The Lord of the Rings* to Use to Show People How to Begin Conversations that lead to Christ

It is at that exact moment of bringing up the subject of Christ in conversation that many willing witnesses simply freeze up, like a person perched on a diving board over a cold swimming pool on a hot summer's day. Once you are in, it's not so bad. Getting in is the problem. The following illustrations for sermons can be used to show how one easily one can go from the safe ground of discussing a popular movie scene to a conversation about Christ. This section is structured with the illustration first, and then a sample segue into witnessing. The more times a pastor verbalizes a sample segue from a popular movie, and shows how easily it can be done, the more likely will people attempt this method themselves.

These illustrations are presented in the alphabetical order of their keyword. For the purposes of this guide, citations from *the Lord of the Rings* will be marked with LOTR and taken from the one volume Houghton-Mifflin 1994 edition currently on sale in bookstores. For easier location in other editions, I will include which of the 6 'books' within the 'Lord of the Rings' is the location of the citation.

Illustrations which have corresponding scenes in the DVD version of the first two films will include a code to help you locate the clip on the DVD. "FOTR" means that the clip is from the movie 'The Fellowship of the Ring' while "TT" indicates that it is from "The Two Towers." The numbers tell you the time stamp where I would start and stop the clip. Of course, you can do as you choose. Do note that the time stamps are for the original DVD releases, not the expanded ones, though I recommend you get the expanded versions just for enjoyment.

Illustrations

Appearances

We all know appearances can be deceiving, yet we make deep and lasting judgments based upon first impressions. In *The Lord of the Rings*, the first time the future King of Middle

Earth makes his appearance, he is a rough, hardened ranger in the dark depths of a pub, ‘a strange-looking weather-beaten man...a travel-stained cloak of heavy dark-green cloth was drawn close about him, and in spite of the heat of the room he wore a hood that overshadowed his face, but the gleam of his eye could be seen...(LOTR, Book 1, p.153)’

Later, his true identity and nature become known, and words written about him come true: ‘All that is gold does not glitter, Not all those who wander are lost; The old that is strong does not wither, Deep roots are not reached by the frost. From the ashes a fire shall be woken, A light from the shadows shall spring; Renewed shall be blade that was broken; The crownless again shall be king (LOTR, Book 1, p. 167).’

Scripture says that ‘The LORD does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart (1 Sam 16:7).’

Segue -> Have you ever been wrongly judged because of your appearance? God would never do that. Do you know Him?

Video Clip: FOTR, 51:58 – 52:38, for the first appearance of Aragorn (Strider)

Community

One of the most famous communities in modern film is that of The Fellowship of the Ring: nine individuals, selected by Elrond of Rivendell to take the evil One Ring to its destruction. Elrond selects two men, a dwarf, an elf, and a wizard to escort four hobbits on a dangerous journey. Author Mark Eddy Smith writes that the best communities are made up of friends, and based on choice. Elrond, the Elflord, ‘refuses to lay a charge on any Fellowship members save Frodo, even though Gimli argues that the oaths may strengthen them when the road becomes dark. It is supremely difficult to hold a community together, but force is never an option...Together the Fellowship fights off wolves, braves the storms of the Redhorn Gate, and dares the Mines of Moria. All of these things are well beyond the strengths of the four hobbits

who set out from the Shire, even accounting for their tremendous luck. They need the strength of Men and wizard, and the hardihood of Elf and Dwarf.” (Tolkien’s *Ordinary Virtues* pp 44 –45). Likewise the Church is made up of individuals of different kinds, strengths and gifts. As Paul wrote, “Just as each of us has one body but many members...(Rom 12:4)”

Segue: Who makes up YOUR community? Are there any Christians in it? Are you part of a church community anywhere? Let me tell you about mine.

Clip: FOTR, 1:31:18 – 1:33:22 presents the choosing of the Fellowship

Compromise with evil

Rarely do people choose the path of evil with eyes wide open. Usually, moral failure is the result of a long series of compromises. Listen to the rationalization of Saruman, the corrupted wizard in *The Lord of the Rings*, as he tries to lure Gandalf to the side of evil: “This then is one choice before you, before us. We may join with that Power. It would be wise, Gandalf. There is hope that way. Its victory is at hand; and there will be rich reward for those that aided it. As the Power grows, it’s proved friends will also grow; and the Wise, such as you and I, may with patience come at last to direct its courses, to control it. We can bide our time, we can keep our thoughts in our hearts, deploring maybe evils done by the way, but approving the high and ultimate purpose: Knowledge, Rule, Order; all the things that we have so far striven in vain to accomplish, hindered rather than helped by our weak or idle friends. There need not be, there would not be, any real change in our designs, only in our means (LOTR Book 2, p. 252).” Gandalf resists the temptation to compromise, is imprisoned, and escapes. Not everyone is so wise.

Segue -> What would you have done had you been Gandalf? Do the ends ever justify the means? Do you think there is an absolute standard of right and wrong?

Video Clip: FOTR, 40:45 – 41:46, less effective than the original print version

Compromise with evil

Gandalf, the wizard in Lord of the Rings, was actually offered the One Ring, the ring of ultimate power, by Frodo, early in the story. Gandalf knew the danger of any compromise with evil when he refused to take it, explaining, “‘With that power I should have power too great and terrible. And over me the Ring would gain a power still greater and more deadly.’ His eyes flashed and his face lit as by a fire within. ‘Do not tempt me! For I do not wish to become like the Dark Lord himself. Yet the way of the Ring to my heart is by pity, pity for weakness and the desire of strength to do good. Do not tempt me! I dare not take it, not even to keep it safe, unused. The wish to wield it would be too great for my strength. I shall have such need of it. Great perils lie before me’ (LOTR, Book 1, p. 60). ”

Segue → Have you ever justified doing something wrong by telling yourself that ‘just this once’ wouldn’t matter? No one sets out to be addicted or corrupted, but every addiction starts with one compromise. I’m so glad that Jesus understands, forgives and can help.

Video Clip: FOTR, 33:47 – 34:35, very useable

Courage

Frodo and Sam are stymied by a sheer drop-off barring their way. They can’t see how far down they would drop and they had no rope. They decided there was no other way than down into the ravine and back up. “‘Very good!’ said Sam gloomily. ‘But I’m going first.’ ‘ You?’ said Frodo. ‘What’s made you change your mind about climbing?’ ‘I haven’t changed my mind. But it’s only sense: put the one lowest as is most likely to slip. I don’t want to come down atop of you and knock you off - no sense in killing two with one fall.’ Before Frodo could stop him he

sat down, swung his legs over the brink and twisted round, scrabbling with his toes for a foothold. It is doubtful if he ever did anything braver in cold blood, or more unwise (LOTR, Book 4, p 592).”

For a Christian, the sacrifice of self for others is the height of virtue: "Greater love has no man that this, that he lay down his life for his friends (John 15:13)."

→ Segue: Has anyone ever done something like Sam did for you? Took a risk, suffered pain, paid a price? Could I share what Jesus did for you?

Creativity, Inspiration

According to J.R.R. Tolkien's own letters, he was correcting papers, for extra income in addition to his professorship at the University of Oxford. Though the task required full concentration, at one point he turned over a sheet of paper and discovered that the student "had mercifully left one of the pages with no writing on it (which is the best thing that could happen to an examiner) and I wrote on it: '*In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit.*' Names always generate a story for me in my mind. Eventually I thought I'd better find out what hobbits were like. But that's only the beginning." (*Biography*, p. 172 and *Letters*, p.215)

Segue-> No one would claim for *The Lord of the Rings* any claim of divine inspiration. Yet who is to say that the first thought about a hobbit, which led to such a creative story with a worldwide impact, could not have been from God? What do you think about the Bible? Do you think it came as thoughts from God? Do you think it is true?

The Cross of Christ

As Frodo comes closer to Mordor, his physical sufferings parallel Christ's agony: he is imprisoned, stripped of his garments, mocked and whipped. Like Jesus on the road to

Golgotha, Frodo is terribly weary. The Ring becomes a more and more intolerable burden. Frodo's journey now powerfully recalls Christ's carrying of the cross. We don't know if Tolkien intended Frodo's suffering to be like Christ, but in his mental anguish, physical pain, being mocked, wearily carrying a burden, and nearly dying on the way to Mt. Doom, we can see the echo of Christ. Even Sam, carrying Frodo the last few hundred feet, powerfully remind us of Jesus carrying the cross. "On he toiled, up and up, turning this way and that to lessen the slope, often stumbling forward, and at the last crawling like a snail with a heavy burden on its back. When his will could drive him no farther, and his limbs gave way, he stopped and laid his master gently down (LOTR, Book 6, p. 920).

But, of course, Frodo does not die for the sins of others. He is merely willing to die to save the world from the Evil One. Jesus DID die, and for my sin and yours.

Segue→ Does Frodo's journey up the slopes of Mt. Doom remind YOU of Christ and the cross? Do you believe Jesus died FOR you?

Defensiveness

At Lothlorien, Galadriel says "Your quest stands upon the edge of a knife. Stray but a little, and it will fall. Yet hope remains while all the company is true." She then looks into each of their hearts, with a perceptiveness that shames them (LOTR, Book 2, p. 348). Boromir responds by challenging Galadriel's right to do this, and even her motives. "To me it seemed exceedingly strange...Maybe it was only a test, and she thought to read our thoughts for her own good purpose; but almost I should have said that she was tempting us, and offering what she pretended to have the power to give" (p. 349) He then refuses to reveal what his own temptation was, and badgers Frodo to reveal what the Lady seemed to offer him. He did so because it already lay in his heart to take the ring. Defensiveness is an early warning sign that a spiritual battle is going on in one's soul!

Be aware that “the temptations that come into your life are no different from what others experience. And God is faithful. He will keep the temptation from becoming so strong that you can't stand up against it. When you are tempted, he will show you a way out so that you will not give in to it” (1 Cor 10:13).

Segue -> Have you ever, like Boromir, resented the questioning of others about your motives and intentions? Is it possible that this signals a spiritual battle going on within you? Could I share with you about God's offer of help?

Video Clip: FOTR, 2:14:30 – 2:15:23, works if you alert people to look for Boromir's guilty look early in the clip.

Failure

For all the hopes of the Fellowship of the Ring, the nine heroes and hobbits that set out to destroy the One Ring of great evil, the Fellowship ends in failure. Gandalf is long dead. Boromir attempted to seize the One Ring, and then was slain in battle. Pippin and Merry, two of the hobbits, were carried off by the orcs. Frodo, badly frightened, abandoned the Fellowship to try to destroy the Ring by himself, though Sam has refused to let Frodo abandon HIM. All that is left is Aragorn, Legolas and Gimli of the original nine.

Failure, though, need not be final. Each part of the splintered Fellowship achieves a piece of the final victory. The captured hobbits bring the living trees into the fray. Aragorn, Legolas and Gimli help Rohan, allies of Gondor, win its battles and come to the aid of Gondor. Frodo and Sam, helped by the distractions caused by their old comrades, arrive at the volcano where the One Ring is to be destroyed.

Mark Eddy Smith writes, “Failure is the end of almost every good beginning. God himself had to contend with it almost immediately after creation. But that did not stop him from continuing on, determined to finish what he started. Perhaps the greatest temptation of all is to

surrender when our plans fail, but in retrospect it is almost always possible to see how initial disappointments and failures led in the end to a greater success than we initially believed possible. (Tolkien's Ordinary Virtues p.59).” “The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone. This is the Lord's doing; it is marvelous in our eyes (Ps 118:22-23).”

→ Segue: Has there ever been a time in your life when what you thought was failure turned out for the best? God specializes in that. I believe Jesus' death saved me from my sin! Here's how.

Video Clip: FOTR, 2:48:05 – 2:49:05, Aragorn, Gimli and Legolas determine to redeem their failure.

Friendship

“There is a friend who sticks closer than a brother (Prov 18:24).” The loyalty of a friend to a friend is strongly shown in the scene from movie, Lord of the Rings, where Frodo is trying to give his friend, Sam, the slip, to spare him from the danger of Mordor, where he intends to go. Even as his boat slips away from the lakeshore, Sam spots him, and comes wading into the water after him. “I'm going to Mordor alone, Sam!” cries Frodo. “Of course you are,” yells Sam, “And I am going with you!” Sam wades into water suddenly over his head, and Frodo has to paddle back to pull him into the boat. Sam. Dripping wet, Sam tells Frodo, “Don't you leave him, Sam Gamgee, they said. And I don't mean to, Master Frodo. I don't mean to.”

Segue -> This reminds me strongly about Jesus. He could have just left us alone and let us drown in our own sin. But I am glad He came back for me and saved me, and I don't ever intend to leave him. How do you feel about Jesus?

Video Clip: FOTR, 2:45:40 – 2:47:39, includes hand of salvation reaching down

Friendship

Merry said to Frodo, "It all depends on what you want ... You can trust us to stick to you through thick and thin-to the bitter end. And you can trust us to keep any secret of yours - closer that you keep it yourself. But you cannot trust us to let you face trouble alone, and go off without a word. We are your friends, Frodo. Anyway; there it is (LOTR, Book 1, p. 103)."

That's friendship's commitment, pure and simple.

→ Segue: Do you have a friend like that? That's exactly how I see Jesus, as my friend.

Generosity

There is a curious reversal of custom in hobbit birthday parties. Mark Eddy Smith explains: 'Presents, rather than being given to the one having a birthday, are given by the guest(s) of honor to all who attend the party. Many of these gifts are merely recycled "mathoms" which get passed throughout the Shire, but this upside down tradition...' is in fact what allows Bilbo the opportunity to break the grip of evil in his life. By giving away his household possessions, he builds the momentum he needs to try to give away the prime source of evil in his own life, the One Ring. (Tolkien's Ordinary Virtues, p23)."

Smith writes, "When we can give out of our abundance, freely and without resentment, and when we can receive gifts from others with neither guilt nor a sense of entitlement, then we can be free of all our possessions, and they will have no hold over us. Generosity does not always seem a grand virtue, but it is often one of the most difficult. Jesus said in Matthew 19:24, "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God (Tolkien's Ordinary Virtues, p.25)."

Segue -> What was the most valuable gift anyone ever gave you? Have you ever thought about the gift that Jesus is willing to give you?

Generosity

Some people are takers by nature, and some are givers. Much of *The Lord of the Rings* is told in the contrast between the characters of Gollum and Sam. Gollum is a hobbit unnaturally old, whose life is now consumed by the desire to get back what he called 'my Precious,' the Evil Ring.

Sam, on the other hand, is a simple hobbit, devoted to Frodo, his friend and master. Jorge J. E. Gracha in "The Quests of Sam and Gollum for the Happy Life", an essay in the book "*The Lord of the Rings and Philosophy*" edited by Gregory Bassham and Eric Bronson, writes on page 66, "His loving nature is revealed when he realizes the power of the seed-box Lady Galadriel had given him at Lothlorien, Instead of keeping it for his garden, as even Frodo suggests, he uses it for the restoration of the whole Shire to its former splendor after it had been devastated by Saruman and his minions (LOTR, Book 6, p. 1000). His thought is always for others."

SEGUE -> Has anyone ever been extraordinarily generous with you? The most generous thing anyone has ever done for me was to spend his life for me. His name? Jesus.

God's Call on our Life

This is what the J.R.R. Tolkien wrote privately of his character Frodo in *The Lord of the Rings*, who carried the burden of the world, a ring of pure evil:

"Frodo undertook his quest out of love - to save the world he knew from disaster at his own expense, if he could, and in complete humility, acknowledging that he was wholly inadequate to the task. His real contract was only to do what he could, to try and find a way, and to go as far on the road as his strength of mind and body allowed. He did that. (Letters, p. 327)."

Segue -> Jesus' servanthood took him to the cross. Is there ANYTHING you are committed to that you would die for? What does it mean to you that Jesus died for you? In Mark 2:14, Jesus saw Levi, the tax collector, sitting at his booth and said, "Come, follow me" and he did? If Jesus said to you, "Come, follow me", would you?

God's Call on our Life

When Frodo, the hobbit hero of *The Lord of the Rings*, learned that the ring he carried was the One Ring, containing the essence of evil, he didn't think he was up to the task of trying to destroy it. "I wish that I had never seen the Ring! Why did it come to me? Why was I chosen?"

'Such questions cannot be answered,' said Gandalf. 'You may be sure it was not for any merit that others do not possess; not for power or wisdom, at any rate. But you have been chosen, and you must therefore use such strength and heart and wits as you have (LOTR, Book 1, p. 60).'

Segue → Have you ever faced a task you didn't think you were equipped to handle? Yet you were the only one who could do it, and you did do it? Did you think God could have had a part in calling you to that task?

Video Clip: FOTR, 1:50:50 – 1:51:31, dialogue nearly identical

Graciousness

Never underestimate the power of graciousness offered to a fellow sinner. Consider the powerful scene from *The Lord of the Rings* in which Frodo's kindness to Gollum very nearly brings Gollum back from his evil course. At a point in the story Tolkien called "the most tragic moment in the Tale (Letters, p. 330)", Frodo and Sam are sleeping. Frodo has been treating Gollum kindly, trusting him, and following him as his guide. Gollum "...slowly putting out a trembling hand, very cautiously he touched Frodo's knee – but almost the touch was a caress.

For a fleeting moment, could one of the sleepers have seen him, they would have thought they beheld an old, weary hobbit, shrunken by the years that had carried him far beyond his time, beyond friends and kin, and the fields and streams of youth, an old starved pitiable thing (LOTR, Book 4, p. 699). But moments later, Sam wakes up, and with ungracious suspicion says roughly “Hey, you! What are you up to?” and then calls Gollum a sneak. The moment of possible restoration for Gollum slips away. From then on, Gollum withdraws into himself, and the green glint of malice in his eyes reappears.

We need to be aware of the possibility of pivotal moments in the lives of people. Like Jesus who said, “Neither do I condemn thee, go and sin no more,” (John 8:11), our graciousness (or lack of) can play a role in the spiritual lives of others.

Segue -> Have you ever felt like you wanted to change your life direction? Could I share how Jesus wants to help you?

Happy Endings

It is an open question as to the identity of the real hero of *The Lord of the Rings*. The character that shows the most positive growth during the story is Sam, who begins as a simple gardener and servant and ends up carrying Frodo up the slopes of Mt. Doom, where the Evil Ring is destroyed. At the story’s end, it is Sam who shows the desired end of great adventures: ‘And he went on, and there was yellow light, and fire within; and the evening meal was ready, and he was expected. And Rose drew him in, and set him in his chair, and put little Elanor upon his lap. He drew a deep breath. “Well, I’m back,” he said (LOTR, Book 6, p. 1008).’

These final words of *The Lord of the Rings* show us that what counts the most in terms of this world’s rewards are the simplest things: home, family and love. An evil empire has fallen, monsters slain, heroes named and rewarded. But in the end ‘three things remain: faith, hope and love. And the greatest of these is love. (I Cor 13: 13).’

SEGUE -> Do you have someone who loves you, truly loves you? Can I tell you about someone who loves me, and also loves you?

Humility

For a very brief time, Sam carried the One Ring of evil. Soon he began to have fantasies. He could claim the ring, and become, “Samwise the Strong, Hero of the Age, striding with flaming sword across the darkened land, and armies flocking to his call as he marched to the overthrow of Barad-dur. And then all the clouds rolled away and the white sun shone, and at his command the vale of Gorgorath became a garden of trees and brought forth fruit. He has only to put on the Ring and claim it for his own and all this could be. In that hour of trial it was the love of his master that helped most to hold him firm; but also deep down in him lived still unconquered plain hobbit-sense: he knew in the core of his heart he was not large enough to bear such a burden, even if such visions were not a mere cheat to betray him. The one small garden of a free gardener was all his need and due, not a garden swollen to a realm; his own land to use, not the lands of others to command (LOTR, Book 6, p.880.”

Segue → Have you ever been tempted to take on more than you were able to do? There is value in humility, in knowing our limits. When we measure ourselves against Jesus, we come up short every time. Jesus, though, is equal to every challenge. How do you feel about him?

Insecurity

We all suffer from insecurity, even successful authors. Clyde Kilby once spent a summer with J.R.R. Tolkien, author of *The Lord of the Rings*. Kilby ‘became convinced that Professor Tolkien was suffering in an accentuated way, because of his genius, from some of the inner conflicts belonging to us all. I found that he had a real measure of “insecurity.” As early as 1939 C.S. Lewis wrote his brother that Tolkien’s “trials, besides being frequent and severe, are usually of such a complicated nature as to be unpenetrable.” Now internationally famous, he

nevertheless needed assurance concerning himself as a writer... (*Tolkien & the Silmarillion*, Clyde S. Kilby, Wheaton: Harold Shaw Publishers, 1976, p. 33).

SEGUE -> I battle insecurity all the time, but what really helps me is my faith in Jesus, who loved me enough to die for me. I feel highly valued when I think of that. Do you?

Judging Sin

Do you think the end of Frodo's quest, when he claimed the Ring as his own and refused to throw it into fires of Mt. Doom, was a failure? Only Gollum biting off his finger with the ring and falling into the fire brought an end to the power of the Evil One. Richard Purtill, in *J.R.R.Tolkien: Myth, Morality and Religion*, Harper & Row, 1984, p.60, writes that Frodo indeed "failed" as a hero, as conceived by simple minds.

“He did not endure to the end: he gave in, ratted. ‘Simple minds’ often see with clarity the simple truth and the absolute ideal to which effort must be directed, even if it is unattainable. Their weakness, however, is twofold. They do not perceive the complexity of any given situation in time, in which an absolute ideal is enmeshed. They tend to forget that pity or mercy is an absolute requirement in moral judgement...we must estimate the limits of another's strength and weigh this against the force of particular circumstances. I do not think that Frodo's was a moral failure. At the last moment the pressure of the Ring would reach a maximum - impossible...for anyone to resist...Frodo had done what he could and spent himself completely.”

→ Segue: What do you think? Was Frodo a failure? A sin? How do you view sin?

Mercy

After all was said and done, the Ring destroyed and even the Shire put aright, there was still the problem of Saruman, who has spoiled Frodo's homeland as a last act of malice. Frodo dismisses the broken wizard from the Shire, but as he passes Frodo, Saruman pulls a

dagger and stabs at Frodo. Sam puts Saruman on the ground and a sword to his throat. "No, Sam," said Frodo. "Do not kill him even now. For he has not hurt me. And in any case I do not wish him to be slain in this evil mood. He was great once, of a noble kind we should not dare to raise our hands against. He is fallen, and his cure is beyond us: but I would still spare him, in the hope that he may find it" (LOTR, Book 6, p.996). Mercy is not giving someone punishment they deserve.

Segue→ How often has God treated US with mercy? How many times has God spared us from a punishment we deserved? Do you remember a time when you were spared? How does that make you feel toward God?

Pity, and God's Will

In *The Lord of the Rings*, there is an occasion when Frodo wishes that his uncle Bilbo had killed Gollum when he had a chance. Gandalf's reply reminds us that God's will may turn on our simple acts of pity.

"But this is terrible!" cried Frodo. "What a pity he did not stab that vile creature, when he had a chance!"

"Pity? But it was Pity that stayed his hand. Pity, and Mercy: not to strike without need..." "I am sorry," said Frodo. "But I am frightened; and I do not feel pity for Gollum...He deserves death."

"Deserves it! I daresay he does. Many that live deserve death. And some that die deserve life. Can you give it to them? Then do not be too eager to deal out death in judgment. For even the very wise cannot see all ends. I have not much hope that Gollum can be cured before he dies, but there is a chance of it. And he is bound up with the fate of the Ring. My heart tells me that he has some part to play yet, for good or ill, before the end; and when that comes, the pity of Bilbo may rule the fate of many – yours not least." LOTR, Book 1, p.58

Of course, in the end, Gollum enables the completion of the quest to destroy the Ring. It is far better, when not able to see the end of a thing, to live by mercy.

Segue -> Have you ever 'gotten away with' something, and sensed the mercy of God? God may have been trying to draw you to Himself. Scripture says, "God is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance (2 Pet 3:9)."

Video Clip: FOTR, 1:49:22 – 1:50:44

Prophecy, the New Jerusalem

Clyde Kilby, in *Tolkien and the Silmarillion*, Wheaton: Harold Shaw Publishers, 1976, writes, "Minas Tirith itself is not unlike the New Jerusalem, both being dominated by the splendor of light. Gandalf took Aragorn up Mount Mindolluin in the early morning and they looked down and saw 'the towers of the City far below them like white pencils touched by the sunlight, and all the vale of Anduin were veiled in a golden mist'" (LOTR, Book 6, P. 949). In Revelation 21:10-11 an angel came to John and carried him to a high mountain and showed him 'that great city, the holy Jerusalem, descending out of heaven from God, having that glory of God...And the city had no need of the sun...for the glory of God did lighten it.'" Is Kilby (p.62-63) right in thinking that Tolkien intended for Minas Tirith to remind us of the New Jerusalem?"

Segue→ what do YOU think will happen after the end of the world? Does it worry you? Can I share how it doesn't have to?

Video Clip: FOTR, 27:17 – 27:37, for a quick glimpse of Minas Tirith

Repentance

In *The Lord of the Rings*, Book 3, p. 404, there is a brief description of Boromir's repentance from his attempt to take the Ring from Frodo. "I tried to take the Ring from Frodo," he said. "I am sorry. I have paid....Farewell, Aragorn! Go to Minas Tirith and save my people! I have failed." And he died.

In the movie, however, Boromir's repentance is far more poignant and useable for sermons. "I tried to take the Ring from him."

Aragorn says, "The Ring is beyond our reach now."

"Forgive me," says Boromir. "I did not see. I have failed you all."

"No, Boromir," says Aragorn. "You have fought bravely. You have kept your honor."

"It is over. The world of men will fall and all will come to darkness, and my City to ruin."

"I do not know what strength is in my blood, but I swear to you I will not let the White City fall, nor our people fail," promises Aragorn.

"Our people," gasps Boromir. "Our people. I would have followed you, my brother; my Captain, my King." Even as he breathes this last surrender of his will, for he has fought Aragorn's leadership all along the way, Boromir dies.

Repentance involves sorrow for the act, and a recovery of right relationship with the one wronged. When that one is God, we must submit to God's rule over our life even as we seek God's forgiveness. One cannot gain forgiveness when one is yet in rebellion.

Segue -> Have you ever felt like you really messed up with God? Let me tell you how God's forgiveness worked with me.

Video Clip: FOTR, 2:41:46 – 2:43:54, similar to Peter's Great Confession of Christ!

Resurrection

Merry and Pippin in Fanghorn forest come across a white haired man in a white robe, clad in a white robe. Thinking it their enemy Saruman, they prepare to attack, but then are delighted to discover it is Gandalf, returned from the dead! “They all gazed at him. His hair was as white as snow in the sunshine; and gleaming white was his robe; the eyes under his brows were bright, piercing as the rays of the sun; power was in his hand. Between wonder, joy and fear they stood and found no words to say. At last Aragorn stirred. ‘Gandalf!’ he said. “Beyond all hope you return to us in our need! (LOTR, Book 3, p. 483-4).” Later, Gandalf describes how he died but, as his work was unfinished, he had been ‘sent back’ to complete it, and given even more power (p. 491).

Segue → How would YOU feel if someone you loved but thought dead stood before you alive once more? Do you believe Jesus rose from the dead? How would you have felt if you had seen Him for yourself?

Video Clip: Gandalf’s First Resurrection Appearance, TT, 42:56 – 45:32

Sacrifice

Douglas K. Blount writes, “So that the rest of the Fellowship may escape Moria, Gandalf stands alone on the Bridge of Khazad-dum to face the Balrog...Of the members of the Fellowship, then, Gandalf is the most powerful. Yet he allows himself to be killed for the sake of the others. He subordinates his own good to the good of the community. Such humility and sacrifice demonstrate not a desire to control or dominate others, but rather a willingness to serve others even at a great personal loss” (from ‘Uberhobbits: Tolkien, Nietzsche, and the Will to Power’, an essay in Bassham and Bronson’s *“The Lord of the Rings and Philosophy”*).

SEGUE -> Do you know any people in human history who really DID give up their lives for others? Some people say that Gandalf reminds them of Jesus.

Video Clip: FOTR, 2:07:20 – 2:10:09, is the death of Gandalf. Note his cry ‘I am the wielder of the Secret Flame’ – the Holy Spirit?

Satan and Sauron

In both the Bible and *The Lord of the Rings*, the specific descriptions of the Evil One are limited in number and length. In Tolkien’s story, we recognize the sinister power of the Ring by its effect on Bilbo, on Gollum, on Sam and especially Frodo, more than by anything that is said directly about it. Richard L. Purtill writes that Tolkien has been criticized for making his chief representative of evil, Sauron, only a brooding presence in the background, but this is far more effective than any amount of direct description that might attempt to arouse feelings of horror. Likewise, in our Christian faith, do we not experience Satan primarily by the effects of evil in our life and the lives of others (J.R.R.Tolkien: *Myth, Morality and Religion*, Harper & Row, 1984, p. 13)?

Segue -> Do you ever see something evil in life and realize there is an Evil Power behind it? What do you believe about the Devil? Do you know the One (Jesus) who stands against him?

Video Clip: TT, 53:38 – 54:08, for the longest glimpse of Sauron.

Sin’s Power

Just after his birthday party, while trying to slip away from the hobbit world, Bilbo is reminded by Gandalf that he had agreed to give the One Ring to his heir, Frodo. It is not so easy to let go of something - even an evil something - once it has become precious to you. Gandalf asks where the Ring is. “‘In an envelope, if you must know,’ said Bilbo impatiently. ‘There on the mantelpiece. Well no! Here it is in my pocket!’ He hesitated. ‘Isn’t that odd now?’ he said softly to himself. ‘Yes after all, why not? Why shouldn’t it stay there?’ (LOTR, Book 1, p.32).”

Gandalf tries to overcome Bilbo's reluctance to surrender the ring with gentle persuasion, explanation, and even strong warnings about its danger. Finally, Bilbo agrees. But as he turns to leave, the ring is STILL in his pocket.

SEGUE -> We all in our heads WANT to be rid of the dark things in our lives. But it's not so easy as just wanting to, is it? As Paul says in Romans, "The good that I would do I do not. The evil that I would not do, that I do. O wretched man that I am! (Rom 7:19,24)" Are there things in your life that you just can't seem to let go of? Can I tell you of One who can help?

Video Clip: FOTR, 20:50 – 23:23, outstanding clip on self-deception

Temptation

Frodo's struggle on the 'Seat of Seeing' (Amon Hen) is very descriptive of the process of temptation. He had put on the Ring to escape Boromir, and from the Seat of Seeing he gazed forth. Then Sauron's Eye sought him. "He hear himself crying out *Never, never!* Or was it *Verily I come, I come to you?* He could not tell. Then as a flash from another point of power came another thought: *Take it off! Take it off! Fool, take it off! Take off the Ring!*

"The two powers strove in him. For a moment, perfectly balanced between their piercing points, he writhed, tormented. Suddenly he was aware of himself again. Frodo, neither the Voice nor the Eye: free to choose, and one remaining instance in which to do so. He took the Ring off his finger (LOTR, Book 2, p. 392)."

So it is with temptation. Powers strive within us, yet God promises, "No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it (I Cor 10:13)."

Segue -> Do you struggle with temptation? Here's how I deal with it:

Temptation's Power

Frodo was confident that the One Ring had no power over him, and proposed destroying it. Gandalf suggested that he try. 'Frodo drew the Ring out of his pocket again and looked at it. It now appeared plain and smooth, without mark or device that he could see. The gold looked very fair and pure, and Frodo thought how rich and beautiful was its color, how perfect was its roundness. It was an admirable thing and altogether precious. When he took it out he had intended to fling it from him into the very hottest part of the fire. But now he found that he could not do so, not without a great struggle. He weighed the Ring in his hand, hesitating, and forcing himself to remember all that Gandalf had told him; and then with an effort of will he made a movement, as if to cast it away – but he found he had put it back in his pocket.

Gandalf laughed grimly. "You see? Already you too, Frodo, cannot let it go, nor will to damage it' (LOR, Book 1, p. 59).

Segue → Sin is like that, isn't it? Have you ever tried to break a habit by your own power? Do you think maybe God could help?

Trust

One of the most surprising plot twists in *The Lord of the Rings* is when Frodo decided to trust Gollum as his guide to Mordor, and even tells him why. Need drove him. Without a guide, Frodo and Sam would have wandered endlessly. Frodo chose Gollum.

Mark Eddy Smith writes in "Tolkien's Ordinary Virtues", pages 84-85, 'Sam is amazed to hear his master confirm (to Gollum) that they are going to Mordor. Gollum is a known friend of Orcs, and if word should get back to the enemy about their intentions, all will shortly be lost. Frodo knows this, yet he chooses not to hide the truth. Gollum responds by clapping his hands to his ears and hissing...All good things hurt Gollum: the light of the Sun and Moon,

anything made by Elves, even simple truth. The unexpected honesty prompts him, against his will, to respond in kind, answering truthfully when Frodo asks him if he has been to Mordor, though he immediately tries to deny it.'

Jesus said, 'Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who hurt you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you (Luke 6:27-28).'

Frodo's trust has an immediate effect on Gollum. Gollum becomes more and more like the old hobbit-like creature he once was, before evil twisted him. Were it not for Sam's cruel rebuke later in the story, that sent Gollum back to his old ways, Frodo's trust would have brought even more peace to the heart of a miserable creature. Jesus treated sinners with respect and offered them the chance to change.

Segue → Has anyone ever offered you respect and trust you didn't deserve? Jesus does. Let me show you how!

Video Clip: TT, 51:01 – 52:35, Frodo decides to trust Gollum over Sam's objection

Video Clip Index

APPEARANCES: (First glimpse of Aragorn/Strider) FOTR, 51:58 – 52:38

COMMUNITY: (The choosing of the Fellowship) FOTR, 1:31:18 – 1:33:22

COMPROMISE WITH EVIL: (Saruman tempts Gandalf) FOTR, 40:45 – 41:46, less effective than the print version

COMPROMISE WITH EVIL: (The Ring is Offered to Gandalf) FOTR, 33:47 – 34:35, very useable

DEFENSIVENESS: (Boromir under Galadriel's gaze) FOTR, 2:14:30 – 2:15:23

FAILURE: (Aragorn, Gimli and Legolas determine to redeem their failure) FOTR, 2:48:05 – 2:49:05

FREINDSHIP: (Sam refuses to abandon Frodo) FOTR, 2:45:40 – 2:47:39, includes hand reaching down, a great metaphor of salvation

GOD'S CALL ON OUR LIFE: (Frodo laments his burden) FOTR: 1:50:50 – 1:51:31, dialogue nearly identical to book

PITY AND GOD'S WILL: (Gandalf and Frodo discuss Gollum) FOTR, 1:49:22 – 1:50:44

PROPHECY, THE NEW JERUSALEM: (A quick glimpse of Minas Tirith) FOTR 27:17-27:37

REPENTANCE: (Boromir's death scene) FOTR, 2:41:46 – 2:43:54, similar to Peter's Great Confession of Christ!

RESURRECTION: (Gandalf's first resurrection appearance) 42:56 – 45:32

SACRIFICE: (The death of Gandalf) FOTR, 2:07:20 – 2:10:09, note his cry 'I am the wielder of the Secret Flame' = the Holy Spirit?

SATAN and SAURON: (longest glimpse of Sauron) TT 53:38 – 54:08

SIN'S POWER: (Bilbo has difficulty giving up the Ring) FOTR, 20:50 – 23:23

TRUST: (Frodo decides to trust Gollum over Sam's objection) TT, 51:01 – 52:35

(lastly, here is the Bibliography for the dissertation...a nice list of useable books that helped me understand evangelism and story-telling structure)

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