



How do I answer someone who says "We all believe in Jesus, that's all that really matters,"?

This question relates to comments that come from friends who belong to other Christian denominations - particularly denominations that have recently been introducing changes into their beliefs and practices based on changes in popular culture (e.g. the ELCA voting to allow practicing homosexuals to be pastors).

For starters, always remember that it won't help to get into an argument. No one wins in a situation like that. Both sides dig in their heels and fight it out. In Colossians chapter four God reminds us that we need to make the most of every opportunity, but that we need to be wise in the way we act, and make sure our our conversations are "filled with grace and seasoned with salt." In other words, make them hungry for more conversation with us on the subject.

It's always a good idea to follow Jesus' example. Jesus frequently would respond to a question (or comment) with another question. One that would get at the heart of what the other person is really dealing with. In the case of this comment, it's likely that the person making the statement doesn't necessarily agree with their church's changes, but neither do they want to change churches - leaving friends and relatives behind and asking their kids to do the same. So they have to find a comment that gives justification for staying.

"Why do you say that?" or a similar question may get your friend talking about the issue more. Asking a question instead of coming back with an answer right away, sends the signal that you are really concerned more about your friend than you are about being right.

If you this comment by your friend (or any other comment) catches you off guard and you can't think of an answer, a reply like this may be helpful, "You know, I'm going to have to think on that one for a bit. Can I get back to you about that?" Of course, make sure to bring the topic back up when you have thought and prayed about it.

Which brings me to another important part: we need to remember to pray and ask God's guidance. Does God want you to understand the truth? Yes. Does God want you to be able to communicate the truth? Yes. Has God provided what we need to do both? Yes. In John 16:12 Jesus promised the Holy Spirit - the Spirit of Truth - who will lead us to all Truth. Jesus also said that God's Word (the is truth." Pray for God's Spirit to lead you to the answer that will not only be truth, but will also speak to the heart of your friend. Pray for God to open your friend's heart to considering what you have to say. Pray for God to give you words and a heart for your friend - not just a heart for being right.

One other example Jesus set for us is the example of the parable. He would tell a story - something the people could relate to - that helps people see the truth for themselves. You can come up with your own parable/comparison, but one that comes to my mind is the example of a cookbook and a recipe.

You could introduce your parable with a comment like, "I guess I look at it kind of like this"

Your grandma always made what you considered to be the best chili in the world. You asked her to write it down so, you would be able to know how to make it. She gave you a copy of the cookbook that she found the recipe in. She said, "Stick to this recipe and it'll always turn out just right for you too." You trusted your grandma, so you trusted the cookbook she gave you.

As you grew up and began to make chili for your friends and family, you kept that cookbook and used the recipe in it. It remained the best chili you'd ever eaten - and most everyone you served it to said the same. You might vary the amount of spices slightly depending on the tastes of your family and friends, but you always stuck to the basics of the recipe in grandma's cookbook.

The Bible is our "cookbook." Jesus is the foundational ingredient. Different Christian congregations can change minor things to give their church a different flavor (like music for example) but once they quit trusting the cookbook, well it won't be long until it's not just the minor things that get changed. It won't be long until people start thinking they can substitute Mohammed or Buddha for the main ingredient (Jesus) and everything will end up ok. But that would be like substituting anchovies for steak in grandma's chili. It's not ok!

I know that may be a bit lengthy, but you get the idea. The basic point of comparison is that once you start to say the Bible can't be trusted on certain points, it won't be long until people won't trust it on the main point.

Thanks for asking,
Pastor David

Send your questions to pastor@livingwordlutheran.net