

CHRISTIAN HEADS, HEARTS, AND HANDS

ARTICLES TO FORM US AS FOLLOWERS OF "THE WAY"

Seven Lies Christians Tell

We mean well, but is the truth really on our lips when we evangelize?

by Tony Kriz

I walked into the filled college lecture hall. The room seats about 200. The seats are terraced up to the two-doored exits at the auditorium's rear. I took my place alone on the floor of the semicircle, eight-foot white boards and smart-screens behind me.

I stare around the room, trying to make eye contact with every person present. This is a breakout session at a conference on the "missional life." For this session, I have been asked to speak on evangelism, or as I prefer to call it, "Cross-Spiritual Communication" or, "How to talk about your faith without being a total jerk."

Once everyone is settled in, they realize that this is not going to be a typical evangelism seminar. I ask the room a question, "How do we Christians lie ... How do we lie when evangelizing?"

At first the room is still and silent. It always starts silent when I ask this question. And then, once the question sinks in, hands dart up all over the room ... the thoughts and ideas jump from the seats more quickly than we can even collect them. It feels like most people have never considered the question before, and then, as they ponder it for the first time, the epiphanies naturally flow. It is like pure discovery in action.

You want to know what is most enlightening about this phenomenon for me? I have witnessed this exact same scene more than twenty times before. Every time I ask this question to a mixed room of informed churchgoers, the room does not stay silent for more than a pregnant moment. Never, not *once* has a room been baffled or confused by the question. The look in people's eyes is never, "I don't think we lie." Instead, at least after that first momentary pause, it is not *if* we lie, it is instead, *how many different ways we lie*. And, as each person shares around the room, most all the other heads nod along in agreement.

Another fascinating thing that occurs is the lovely exhale of peace and freedom that follows an honest and thoughtful exchange about such matters ... it is like we have always known such things to be true deep down inside, but we have never been given permission to just say the thoughts aloud.

I want to encourage an exhale of peace and freedom here. I am going to take a few minutes to simply start the conversation. Here is a short list, in no particular order, of seven of the ways that I am aware that I and others have lied (and still do) when we practice cross-spiritual communication. I hope that you will add your own thoughts in the comments below. Maybe we will get to share a classroom of epiphanies together right here in *Leadership Journal*.

1. We lie when we claim we are more confident than we really are. The culture of pretending within Christianity seems almost at an epidemic level. Many of us feel the need to hide our doubts and questions. We feel compelled to act like our faith life is totally satisfying, when in fact it often feels limited, dry, cold or numb. I think we also believe that our "witness" will be less powerful if we reveal a less than "perfect" religious experience. The funny thing is that the opposite is often true. Non-Christians are often drawn to stories of an authentic and even struggling faith.

2. We lie when we claim that unexplainable things are in fact explainable. God is transcendent and beyond even the shadowy wisps of imagination in our finite minds. The Trinity, for instance, is not as simple as a metaphor of water (ice, water, steam) or an egg (shell, white, yoke). Sometimes I think we would be better off if we just said, "These ideas are so beyond me that if God did reveal them to me, I am pretty sure my brain would explode."

3. **We lie when we don't acknowledge our doubts within the drama of faith.** This is similar to number one above but just on a more detailed level. When another person challenges us with a difficult theological/philosophical issue, sometimes it is best to just admit that those questions are very challenging and even emotionally taxing on the soul (I think people like to know that our faith is so important to us that it does impact our soul-state in both encouraging and difficult ways.) Difficult questions for me include: *What is the destiny of people with no access to the true and loving message of Christ's gospel? Where did evil come from? Why did God put this whole human story into motion when it has caused so much pain?*

4. **We lie when we pretend like the Bible doesn't say some really nasty things when in fact it does.** For instance, God commands genocide. He just *does* ... at least from a clear and honest reading of the Bible. There is also a verse that says, "Happy is the one who seizes your infants and dashes them against the rocks (Psalms 137:9)." If we want the Bible to be our document, we need to own the whole thing. (The same thing can be said for the atrocities in the story of the church, past and present.)

5. **We lie when we claim we understand other beliefs, faiths and world views.** We need to stop saying things like, "I understand Islam," or, "I know what a Muslim thinks/believes." Do you want someone saying that they understand your faith experience because they once lived in a Greek Orthodox neighborhood? Do you think a Muslim would accurately understand your beliefs because they read a book about Christianity (particularly one written by Muslim scholars)? Belief systems are extremely diverse (heck, in Christianity there are hundreds of Protestant denominations alone, before we even talk about Orthodox, Coptic, Armenian, Syrian, Palestinian, just to scratch the surface). Other religions are just as diverse. Further more, faith experience can be as specific as a neighborhood, family or individual.

6. **We lie when we claim that all of our beliefs are a "10".** This one is probably going to frustrate some people, but we are disingenuous when we claim all of our dogmas with equal veracity. To put it another way, on a scale of one to ten, not all Christian beliefs are a "10." Do I believe in the historicity of a floating zoo? Yes I do. Do I hold to the specific details of that historic event with the same "lay my life on the line" conviction as I do the historical death on a cross and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth? No, I do not. The details of the zoo are not a 10 for me. Jesus is a 10.

7. **Finally, and most importantly, we lie (insidious and barbaric lying) when we pretend like we really, really, *really* love the other person when in fact we don't.** We do not love people when we dismiss their story (including their hopes, values, beliefs and convictions). We do not love people when we do not empathically listen to them, as opposed to spending that time formulating a counter-argument. We do not love others when we reduce them to labels, caricatures, or opponents. If we love, then we will find them shockingly beautiful and fascinating creations. We will find their stories riveting. We will radiate affection. Humans know deep down when they are or are not truly loved.

I would like to close with a different sort of lie. This is not a way that I lie, but instead a way that I was lied to. I was lied to by religious people. They told me that cross-spiritual communication is dangerous. It is dangerous because when I do it, there is a strong possibility that it will divide and the other person will become my enemy.

Well, in my experience sharing my faith around the world and in my post-Christian city, if we can share honestly, authentically and with humility, division does not happen. Instead, friendship happens.