

Column

“We think deeply in order that we may speak simply,” I once heard the renowned Anglican theologian J.I. Packer say. A quarter of a century later, I am still pondering and trying to apply his words.

During a question-and-answer session at a theological conference, a woman went to the microphone and said:

“My husband is studying for the pastoral ministry. He spends hours each day reading ‘deep theology’. It all seems so abstract. What possible relevance does what he is studying have to do with real life? When, for example, our young son asks his dad about where God was when his pet cat died?”

There was silence. It was at this point Dr. Packer gave his 10-word answer. That was it. Another person stepped to microphone.

A number of years ago I had the opportunity to tour the U.S. Space & Rocket Center in Huntsville, Ala. I found the exhibits interesting, but it was only when a professor from the University of California at Berkeley, came alongside our group and began sharing his knowledge that they really came alive. He did not bore us with minute details of how the various components of the space equipment went together and worked, though he knew those details. Rather, he spoke simply in terms educated people in other fields could understand. It was an experience I shall never forget.

Packer was right: We think deeply in order that we may speak simply.

In recent days, it has been as if I have had Dr. Packer sitting on my shoulder as I have gone about writing a curriculum of Christian education for young people. The book is entitled “A Faith of My Own,” and I devoutly hope it will be off the press and ready for distribution before the end of the year.

In writing of each chapter, I have tried not just to give accurate information, but to do so in an age-appropriate manner. How successful I have been remains to be seen.

If you think about it, ‘thinking deeply in order to speak simply’ is the task of every Christian. When people ask about our faith, what we believe and why, we need to have something to tell them. More than that, we need to be able to tell them in a manner the enquirer can take in. To be able to do this, requires knowledge and prior thought.

Unfortunately, many who name Christ's name and regularly attend Sunday services have not done their homework. When asked about their faith, at worst they are mute; at best their response is stumbling.

Before his conversion to Christianity, the late Nabeel Qureshi was a devout follower of Islam. In his book "Seeking Allah, Finding Jesus" he tells about, as a high school student, trying to trip up his Christian schoolmates concerning their faith. Most fell flat on their face because they had never thought through what they said they believed.

What about you? Pretend a new family moved in over the road. They see you leaving each Sunday morning for service. They have noticed the sticker on your car reading: "Our doors are open" and the name of your church. They were impressed when you came over, introduced yourself and welcomed them when they first moved to the neighbourhood. They see you helping others and having a joyful spirit.

Still using your imagination, you run into a member of this family at the mailbox and this person says: "I have been watching you and see you are a Christian. Would you mind telling me what you believe and why?" What could you tell this person? Could you speak with confidence, conviction and simplicity?

Christians get their marching orders in 1 Peter 3:15: "But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts: and be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear."

Are we listening?

ALMIGHTY and merciful God, of whose only gift it cometh that thy faithful people do unto thee true and laudable service; Grant, we beseech thee, that we may so faithfully serve thee in this life, that we fail not finally to attain thy heavenly promises; through the merits of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. (Collect for the 13th Sunday after Trinity, The Book of Common Prayer)

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