

## 18. Good Explanations

Insight 14 spoke a great deal about the qualities of ministries that lead to high levels of confidence and commitment of their members. This and the following insight explain how commitment and confidence in the ministry are driven primarily by the educational programs and how educational programs rest on good explanations and good disciples.

*Good explanations drive religious commitment.*

According to a study by Rodney Stark and Roger Finke entitled *Acts of Faith*,<sup>144</sup> religious confidence and commitment are highly impacted by the quality of our religious explanations.

You'll find many interesting topics if you get the book and skim through the index. Notice which topic has the most entries: "commitment, religious." In one sense, all the topics are about religious commitment: what religious commitment is, why religious commitment drives the success of religious movements and how religious commitment is obtained. But in another sense, they are about the impact of good religious explanations.

Stark and Finke tie their theory of religious explanations to the health and success of religious organizations. Here's a summary in three steps:

1. *Explanations are teachings about how life works, a "conceptual simplification or model of reality" that helps one to navigate life.* Religious explanations provide a life roadmap by including "the supernatural" or "the gods." Religious explanations are risky. Because they include the supernatural, they are not fully open to being proved, except perhaps in another lifetime. We accept this risk because some human needs, such as a desire for eternal life or justice in the face of overwhelming oppression, have no alternative but to trust God.

2. *Religious commitment is the degree to which we follow the religious explanation, in practice and belief, regardless of the risk.* In practical terms, religious commitment determines the degree to which we will make sacrifices and support the religious teaching of the ministry. By committing to the teaching, we support the organization.

3. *Religious organizations are social groups that propagate religious explanations by various means, such as ritual, prayer, and teaching, thereby generating religious commitment.* Religious organizations flourish when religious commitment is high and flounder when religious commitment is low.

I am convinced that ministry as educational consciousness and skills is all about establishing confidence in the ministry's teachings and growing the religious commitment of the ministry's members. Stark and Finke should convince everyone that confidence and commitment begin with good explanations. But, as I will explain next, our explanations lose clarity when the

<sup>144</sup> Rodney Stark and Roger Finke, *Acts of Faith: Explaining the Human Side of Religion*, University of California Press, 2000.

ministry confuses everyone with a spiritual smorgasbord of spiritual offerings.

*The cost of the spiritual buffet.*

Many congregants of Unity churches today, especially new ones, feel they have been given a “spiritual buffet” of sermons, workshops, classes, and programs. The variety of offerings is sometimes so diverse that they are not only incapable of figuring out what they need but are often unable to determine what the Unity church is all about. This is a spiritual problem for the congregant and an organizational issue for the minister and the church.

Syncretism is the attempt to reconcile different or contrary beliefs, often by melding practices of various schools of thought. Religious syncretism, as practiced in many Unity churches, is the spiritual leader's attempt to make sense of the spiritual buffet by mixing it all and saying that Unity is “open and flexible,” “non-dogmatic,” and “unlike those in traditional Christianity.” That may be a convenient way to sneak the guru of the month onto the church calendar. Still, it leads to long-lasting harm in the spiritual journey of those who come on Sunday believing in Mind-Idea-Expression and seeking oneness, flow, and manifestation. Mixing the meat and potatoes of Unity teachings, however one defines them, with the extras confuses and frightens many. Here's why.

As said in Insight 14, *Rational Choice in the Religious Marketplace*, explanations are beliefs about how life works. Explanations can be religious, magical, or scientific. Of the three, only religion garners high levels of

commitment. Magic and science may arouse interest, but people won't commit to magic or science as they will to religious explanation. When the essential explanations of what the church teaches are *unclear*, confidence in its mission and vision declines, and so does the commitment of its members.

But don't we teach that truth is universal? Don't we say Truth is found in all religions? Not in the eyes of the congregant, or at least in a congregant looking for something to commit to. What congregants want from us are answers, straightforward answers. They seek the truth from the ministry leadership about what the ministry teaches. Unclear teachings are costly.

To explain why that is so, here is a warning taken from *Acts of Faith*,<sup>145</sup> which is direct and needs little interpretation:

That doctrines can directly cause ineffective leadership is widely evident in contemporary New Age and 'metaphysical groups'. If everyone is a 'student,' and everyone's ideas and insights are equally valid, then no one can say what must be done, who is to do what, and when. The result is the existence of virtual nonorganizations — mere affinity or discussion groups incapable of action. In similar fashion, some of the early Christian gnostic groups could not sustain effective organizations because their fundamental doctrines prevented them from ever being anything more than a loose network of individual adepts, each pursuing secret knowledge through private, personal means.

<sup>145</sup> Stark and Finke (2000), *Seeking Religious Causes of Religious Phenomena*, p34

The above is a stinging assessment of New Age's impact on metaphysical religion. The problem is not that New Age is wrong; it is that New Age is incapable of garnering high religious confidence and commitment.

*James Dillet Freeman's rant.*

James Dillet Freeman had this say about the religious explanations found in many Unity churches.<sup>146</sup>

And then the other thing, the thing that has made us angry with churches, sometimes. God! God, do you see what some of them do? And the incredible, fantastic and unbelievable things they teach? There is a limit. My only feeling is that Unity is a very free and liberal organization and within that free, liberal organization we permit you to go pretty much your own way from robes if you want them and maybe even kneeling benches — out there on the far side (laughter) — alter lights and crosses, we've got them. We haven't squawked about that. And clear over to the other side to the guy who does nothing but get up and give a psychological lecture.

But, when you bring every kind of screwball New Thought organization that exists, we get irritated! You know, it is Unity — we do have some kind of a teaching. And we stand up for certain things in our literature so

<sup>146</sup> *James and Billie Freeman Reflect on Unity*. Clip #13. <https://www.truthunity.net/audio/james-dillet-freeman/james-dillet-and-billie-freeman-reflect-on-unity>

that the people who take our literature expect a fundamentally certain approach. It's free, but still, it's what it is. And we may go to a Unity center and get an approach that's altogether different from this, or stresses something so — anything from seances to life readings to what-have-you. We're disturbed because they're disturbed.

We don't think that this is what they ought to give in the name of Unity. Now we're not against some people doing that, but go do it with some organization that believes in it. I'm for that. I'm for people having seances, life readings, anything they want to have. But not in the name of Unity. That's all. That seems fair enough to me. And I think that basically to a great extent that's why there has been some collision between the two, don't you?

We see, we get those things and people write to us and we're taken aback. Doesn't seem to be unfair for us to ask if you want to be Unity, who don't you stick, pretty much — you can be very free. The teachings of the Fillmores and the teachings of Unity magazines and Unity books leave you very free, folks. But why not do it in the name of Unity if you want to do it in the name of Unity? That's all. Go do it in somebody else's name.

The seances were only the beginning. The spiritual buffet has transformed Unity from being "God's metaphysical garden" to being "God's metaphysical jungle." Many people find that Unity's teachings are no longer comprehensible. The result is that Unity's classic teaching

on Mind, Idea, and Expression has been choked off by, in the words of James Dillet Freeman, the thorns of “every kind of screwball New Thought organization that exists.”

### *Qualities of good explanations in the digital age.*

I offer a workshop on *Ministry in the Digital Age*<sup>147</sup>, where I deal with how we can effectively communicate our message in a media-driven culture. The framework for effective communication is that our message must be authentic, powerful, simple, and social. Look at these short summaries and observe how personal testimonies from committed congregants may be:

1. *Authentic.* No era in human history has placed more emphasis on trust than the digital era. In a digital world, confidence is obtained not by regulation, law, or physical inspection but rather by the perception of authenticity. We have become highly sensitive to any indication of deception. Religion, in particular, has always depended on confidence (or faith). Still, the distributed nature of digital media is so susceptible to misuse that a ministry's authenticity has become its most important characteristic. And, given the post-modern era in which we live, the perceived authenticity of a ministry is arguably more important than even the Truth of the ministry's teaching. Ministries that do not garner trust quickly fall by the wayside, where fear-based thinking patterns catch them.

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<sup>147</sup> *Ministry in the Digital Age.* <https://www.truthunity.net/ministry-in-the-digital-age>

2. *Deep and Powerful.* Ministries that have established a firm foundation of faith must then show that their spiritual pathway and practices have sufficient depth and power to transform lives. As Huston Smith asked, “can it get drunks out of ditches?” If the ministry's teachings and practices cannot transform lives and enable deep change in character and behavior, then it will not be successful over time. Depth and power in the pathway and practice garner member commitment, and member commitment maintains consistent thinking patterns. Without it, ministries soon wither away because their members are easily discouraged and frustrated with life's challenges.

3. *Simple.* Ministries that have achieved high levels of trust and commitment among members may expand their spiritual offerings to satisfy the needs of a more spiritually diverse membership. However, successful ministries will expand their offerings in ways easily understood by their members and related to the ministry's foundational teachings. Expanded offerings may be helpful, but not if they make the spiritual journey of its members complex or confusing. The clarity and simplicity of a ministry's teachings will foster harmonious thinking patterns among its members. Without clarity and simplicity, ministries become choked by thorns and thistles of a confusing, complex buffet of spiritualities.

4. *Social.* Successful ministries have one additional task to be sustainable over the long run. Their work must be in creative alignment with other ministries that share the same unique vision, mission, and values. We live in a post-modern era, where Truth is often evaluated in relationship with other known Truths. This means

spiritual seekers will evaluate Truth by assessing its prevalence among trusted sources. Truth, for the post-modern, is distributed and networked. The vitality of a ministry in the digital age depends on its ability to thrive on the good ground and organic process of providing spiritual benefits in a cooperative and pluralistic manner.

You might have noticed that these four qualities are not my own. They come from Jesus' *Parable of the Sower*.<sup>148</sup> A sower went out to sow. Some of the seed fell by the road, and the birds quickly came and devoured it. (People in the digital world are cynical and looking for authenticity.) Other seeds fell on rocky ground where they could not grow deep enough to withstand the difficulty in life. (The source had no power to make life meaningful.) Other seed fell among the thorns and was constrained. (By the complexity of the spiritual buffet.) But some of the seed fell in good soil and was able to make organic, social connections with the earth and other vegetation. It thrived.

I am aware that, for the metaphysical Christian, this parable is more about the qualities of our consciousness than the qualities of our explanations. I include the parable here because our religious explanations are tightly related to our disciples' consciousness, which will be discussed in the following insight. Both are essential for an excellent educational ministry.

### *How explanations are communicated.*

To summarize, people come to a ministry looking primarily for religious explanations about how life works. They will commit to the ministry to the extent that they are confident in those explanations.

But explanations, by themselves, are best communicated by interacting with others and listening to what they have to say. Further, we tend to place more confidence in what our peers say than in those identified as spiritual leaders. So, besides good explanations, we need good disciples. That is what the following insight, *Good Disciples*, is about.

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<sup>148</sup> *Parable of the Sower*. Mark 4:1-9. <https://www.truthunity.net/web/mark#4>