

## ***Inoculating your children***

Here are a few ways in which you can inoculate your children, to make sure they don't 'catch' the Christian faith.

Sorry, I suppose I shouldn't joke about something so serious, but two years ago, I had little hope that any of my own family would follow my faith. Now, I feel totally different: I see the gospel in a different, more beautiful light; now I see God (=Jesus) in a different, more beautiful light. Sorry, men, but think of God as a mother who sees her children going off the rails. Feel her heart of longing! **That** is how God feels about my family. Yes, I have hope for them!

And of course it's not just our children; we can, and do, inoculate anybody and everybody.

I think that the most powerful inoculation tool is our CERTAINTY, saying (or implying): I know this is true. / Take it or leave it, but I'm right about this. / I have definite evidence. / I've seen it, therefore it's true. / It's true because the Bible says so.

Sorry, but I believe this is a total distortion of Jesus' teaching: Have faith. / Trust me. / Your faith has saved you, go in peace. / I am the truth. I am the way. / I'll give you life in all its fullness.

Jesus did **not** offer us certainty; rather he offered us a relationship of trust. And what a glorious freeing difference that is – we don't need certainty; we just need trust!

But as I look back I can see a lot of ways that I have inoculated people. It's basically, as I've said repeatedly, that I've spent 48 years as a card-carrying Pharisee: someone who is well-meaning, zealous for the faith, trying to help people to become Christians, by arguing (discussing) with them, convincing them that they are wrong and I am right. I have persuaded a few people, but how many have I inoculated?!

At my most stupid, when I was in that sect, I was discussing on an Acorn email group and the subject of homosexuality came up. So I thought it would help to convince people of the reality of the spirit world: I repeated what the leader had said, that he could look at someone and, by the dark colour of their aura (I still believe that he **could** see things about people by their auras) he could tell that they were gay. How crass; how stupid; what a massive inoculation shot I delivered that day. God forgive me!

I'm sure you'll be able to think of other inoculation techniques, but I'll suggest a few here. The way I'll play this is to suggest some really serious forms of inoculation, to get you nodding and saying, "Yes, it's terrible what **they** did", and then pop in a few that will be nearer to home.

My history isn't very good – a grade 9 at O level (7, 8 and 9 were different levels of failure, so I got the best!) – so please correct me if I'm wrong, but is it really possible that Christians could justify, from the Bible, treating black people as inferior, to be kept separate, for fear of corrupting white people? And didn't Arianism and the Nazi movement have some roots in the church?

What about the Victorians?! How much inoculation did they do?! Yes, there were Christians who did wonderful charitable work, but there was also a lot of hypocrisy. And Christians were guilty

of terrible paternalism, almost male supremacy, despite the fact that Jesus shamelessly broke the social norms of his day in his positive attitude to women. And what about the use of corporal punishment, both adult and what was effectively child abuse – well, the Bible **does** say, repeatedly, “Spare the rod and spoil the child.” (But see my forthcoming article ‘What is the Bible II – Interpreting it like Jesus.’)

Let’s lighten the mood with a more gentle example of inoculation, where someone thought they were ‘witnessing’, but which I felt might not have been too sensitive. I chatted to a lady in the hospital restaurant, who turned out to be a Christian, and she told about her operation a few years earlier. It was for a brain tumour, and there was a very real chance that she wouldn’t survive the operation. She did survive and is serving God with great gusto. Excellent, but she said that she told the surgeons afterwards, “While I very much respect your skill and care, I know that God was controlling your hands as you performed that operation.”

Thinking of healing, I go back to the mid 1980s, when Sue was healed at a stroke from her asthma when I prayed for (unofficially!) at a healing meeting. Around that time, we were praying for a child with cancer, and someone said they believed that God had told them he was going to heal her. She died, and her parents haven’t been to church since, as far as I’m aware.

Then a friend went to a family funeral recently, where the vicar thought it a good time to tell people that if they didn’t believe in Jesus, they would go to hell.

OK, that’s enough negative; we can all think of ways where we, or friends, for the best of reasons, have taken the opportunity to face people with the ‘turn or burn’ option, but as I’ve said repeatedly, I don’t think that is the gospel; rather, it’s one of the many ways (and possibly not the most helpful way) of picturing the process of salvation.

So, positively, I’m more than happy, where the opportunity arises (not where I artificially twist the conversation, as some people are trained to do) to mention Jesus, the things he said and did, what happened to him, how his disciples claimed that he had risen from the dead. That, I believe, is what Jesus and the New Testament generally mean by ‘preach the gospel’.

But I think we’d do well to take careful note of: *‘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**.’* (1 Peter 3:15)

Yes, pray and pray and pray for – and keep your eyes and ears open for – opportunities where you can **answer** people. That means **listen** to them! Listen to where they are at; show a genuine concern for them and **don’t** just ‘listen for an opportunity to witness to them’. If you’re answering questions they aren’t asking, you’re probably just inoculating them, don’t you think?

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