

# It's Hard to Be Different

Jim Long

If you are a Christian, you will know what I mean when I say, "There are times when you wish no one *knew* you were a Christian." Namely, when you're outnumbered. It's embarrassing to be out of step with the majority.

It happened my senior year of high school, when an art teacher noticed I had a Bible with me and put me on the defensive. In front of the whole class he gestured toward the black book and said, "I thought God was dead."

I had to think fast. Even so, all that would come to my numbed mind was a sarcastic comment: "No, He's alive and well and living in Argentina." Not exactly what the church folks would call "witnessing."

I guess I did better my first year at state college. But not much. My sociology professor was an outspoken Christian, and he knew I shared his views. During one class session the discussion heated up, though I don't remember what was being debated. In fact, I could not honestly say that I was giving the fracas my undivided attention. Prof jerked me back to reality with the loud, bold question: "Jim, as a born-again Christian, what's your perspective on this?"

I do not remember what I said. I think I stammered something reasonably coherent, though I'm not positive. I do recall a hot feeling above the collar; I'm sure my face was glowing, like that of a refugee from a nuclear-reactor meltdown.

As I say, there are times when you wish no one knew you were a Christian. So it is with some unease that I recall the words of Jesus: "You are the light of the world. A

city on a hill cannot be hidden" (Matthew 5:14).

In time, I became more bold. It was important to me to share my views as a Christian. Perhaps you've heard the same analogy that was tossed at me: "If you had discovered the cure to cancer, you wouldn't keep it a secret, would you?" And the preacher-type would continue, "Well, you've found the cure to sin. . . ." Et cetera.

No, I did not want to "light a lamp and put it under a bowl." The light, *obviously*, belongs out in the open, on some kind of stand, so that "it gives light to everyone in the house" (5:15).

I knew, too—instinctively, I guess—that being "the light of the world" meant more than illuminating people with Christian *words*. The city on the hill is noticed because it is different from its sur-



roundings. Different, in the same sense that light contrasts with darkness. The two are not the same. They are, in fact, opposites.

Being Christian, then, involves more than holding to different *ideas*, expressed in religious-sounding words. Being Christian means I live differently. I am, at the heart of me, *different*.

"Let your light shine before men," Jesus insisted, "that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven" (5:16).

"See your good deeds," He said. Not just, "Hear your good ideas."

But where do the good deeds come from?

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Robin was very attractive. She also had a pleasant personality. She was a fun person, easy to be around. Everyone wanted to date Robin.

We both worked afternoons at our church (so did my girlfriend), and the three of us became good friends. At the time, Robin was not going with anyone, and I remember the afternoon she told us why. She was disillusioned; though, come to think of it, she may have used the word "disgusted."

She hadn't always gone out with Christian guys, but had decided she wanted to change that. That's when it got discouraging. The Christian guys, she complained, were no different from "the pagans." She had even gone out with a youth pastor from another church (Robin was 19); he wouldn't keep his hands off her, even when she protested.

The Christian guys might say they were different. They might claim Christian *ideas*, but Robin was frustrated that it was so hard to

see a difference.

Hmmm.

I am the light of the world. But if I take advantage of you, I hide the light. If I lie or cheat or steal, I unplug the lamp. If I cannot control my temper, I create a blackout.

Jesus used another analogy.

"You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men" (5:13).

Back then, salt was not only used as a seasoning, but also as a preservative. It kept food from spoiling. Salt, then, was critically important. But if it lost its distinctiveness—its difference—it also lost its value.

And so I ask myself, "If I claim to be Christian, but lose *my* distinctiveness—if I am no different—don't I lose something of *my* value?"

I am the salt of the earth.

I am the light of the world.

People are supposed to see my good deeds.

Hmmm.

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If you've read the New Testament, you know that Jesus repeatedly frustrated people by telling them that religion did not amount to much. Oh, it was good, as far as it went. But religion would never put you within reach of heaven. Religion would never connect you with God. It might point you in the right direction. It might

seem to close the gap. But when you'd finally stretch out your hand to touch the hand of God, the distance between you would remain far too great, no matter how religious you became.

"I tell you," Jesus said, "that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven" (5:20).

These people thought of Pharisees and teachers of the law as religious superstars. They were to religion what Michael Jordan is to basketball. If anyone would make it to heaven, the Pharisees would. But Jesus said, "You're going to have to be a whole lot better than that."

Encouraging words?

Not really.

Let's recap.

You are the salt of the earth.

You are the light of the world.

Shine that light! Show your good deeds!

But you'd better be more righteous than the religious people.

Now, where do these good deeds come from?

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Consider this: Jesus says, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them" (5:17).

Jesus fulfilled the Laws and the Prophets in the sense that He kept their expectations. He was perfect. He also fulfilled the Law and the Prophets in the sense that he was the object of all their promises. They pointed to Him. He was Himself their fulfillment.

Now, consider this:

Do you suppose it's possible that Jesus could fulfill the Law and the Prophets, even in you? Could it be that His purpose in dying *for* you was also that he could live *in* you?

There may be times when you wish no one knew you were a Christian. Like when you're outnumbered. But aren't we usually outnumbered? And aren't we supposed to be the "visible minority," our good ideas illuminating murky discussions, our good deeds shining like light?

You are the salt of the earth, but Jesus Himself is the seasoning and preservative within you.

You are the light of the world, but Jesus provides the wattage. The light is shining already; you don't have to plug it in or turn it on. Just don't hide it under a bowl.

*Jim Long is editor of Campus Life magazine (Christianity Today, Inc. Copyright © 1992). Used by permission.*

### Pontius' Puddle

