

## Some Thoughts on the WWJD? (What Would Jesus Do?) Bracelet

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Throughout the country, there are thousands of people, including unknown numbers of children, who wear a small bracelet inscribed with, *WWJD?* ("What Would Jesus Do?"). I became aware of this when my grandson wore one of these home from elementary school. He was quite proud of it, and told me that one of his classmates had given it to him. I asked him how he would use his, and he said wasn't certain. He thought he was to ask himself this question when he wanted to do something, and do what Jesus would do, a responsive demamap (MacNeal, 1998). When I asked him how he would know what Jesus would do, he said he didn't know, and turned on the cartoons.

I did not trouble him with the questions, "What would Jesus do about what?" "When would he do this?" and "How would he do it?" because I did not want my grandson to suspect my sanity, a fate that often befalls general semanticists.

I continued to ponder the matter, wondering about the thinking of the thousands of people who undoubtedly believe that the question on the bracelet is an important question that can be answered with some certainty. I thought about it some more when I learned that the two leading candidates for President of the United States share the philosophy implied by the bracelet. Mr. Bush declares that the most influential person in his life is Jesus Christ, and Mr. Gore has said that he is a "Born-again Christian" (Is there any other kind?) and stated that when he is faced with a decision, asks himself, "What would Jesus do?"

I have no objections to people wearing the bracelet, if it helps them become happier and more productive, but suppose you adopted the philosophy implied by the question the bracelet asks and attempted to us it as a responsive demamap (MacNeal, 1999): How would you answer the question?

To be specific: What would Jesus do if He were a female, age 16 years, who was pregnant as a result of rape? What would He do if He were a child, age 6 years, and was a victim of sexual abuse? What would Jesus do if He were a black person repeatedly abused because of his race? What would Jesus do if he were a gay high-school student? Neil Postman said that he would be interested in what Jesus would have to say about human cloning (Postman, P.12), and I share that interest. You, no doubt, can think of some other questions that reflect actual conditions.

You might try to find the answer by reading the New Testament, but there are some major problems presented by this approach. We do not *know* that Jesus made any of the statements attributed to Him, but suppose the accounts are accurate and that He uttered every word the writers of the New Testament attributed to Him. He did not often explain His messages, and

when He did explain them, as He did when He interpreted some of His parables to His disciples, readers may not understand the explanations.

There are several texts that might give a thoughtful person some concerns.

Take the passage that says “Whosoever shall blaspheme against the Holy Ghost hath no forgiveness in this life or in the life to come” (Mark 3:29). What does that mean? How can we know whether we have done this, and, if we were to take the statement literally, would it be a good thing or a bad thing if we have done it and were to find out about it?

According to one of my friends, a psychiatrist, a frequent complaint of people in mental institutions is that they have committed this sin against the Holy Ghost, and, according to my friend, none of these people could come up with the evidence that they had so acted.

I once tried to comfort a lady who thought that she had committed this unpardonable sin because she had ridiculed a TV evangelist who appeared to be working miracles on his programs. Had she?

And what about the statement that we should cut off any member that offends us, even plucking out an eye or cutting off other members that might lead us astray? (Matthew 5:29-30) Another of my friends, chief of surgery at a large hospital, told me that, on occasion, he had attempted to undo the work of people who had attempted self-castration, and that some of them cited this passage as proof that they had done the right thing. Had they?

Should the Supreme Court Justices wear Jesus bracelets? There is a passage that tells us to “Judge not lest ye be judged” (Matthew 7:1). Does this apply to them? How do you know? I have long interpreted this to mean, “Judge behavior, not people; hate sin, but not the sinner.”

Am I correct?

There is another passage that tells us that we have to become as little children in order to enter the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 18:3). As a teacher, I have worked with many faculty members who, according to my observations of their behavior on occasion, will make it through the pearly gates with ease. I also plead guilty and deserving of salvation. My wife will serve as a witness for me. Do we qualify according to this passage? How do you know?

There is another passage that tells us to sell what we have and give the proceeds to the poor (Matthew 10:21) thereby, I infer, becoming poor ourselves. If we all tried this, wouldn't we spend a lot of time writing checks and giving them to each other? Am I wrong?

There is another passage that has always intrigued me. It states that “If we have faith as small as a mustard seed, we could say to a mountain, ‘Be thou cast into the sea,’ and it would be fulfilled” (Matthew 17:20). Now *belief* is the *opinion* that a certain statement is true, and *faith* is said to be *choosing* to believe that a statement is true when there is *no* evidence to support the belief or even when available evidence *contradicts* the belief. A conclusion that some children might reach from all of this is that “If you are stupid, you can perform miracles, if you can be stupid on purpose.” True or false?

Jesus also believed that deafness, speechlessness, and other disorders and diseases were caused by demoniac possession, and that he had the power to cast these demons out and cure the afflicted, a belief that is held by many, if not most, fundamentalist Christians today. He claimed that both He and the Pharisees' exorcists could do so by binding Satan (Matthew 12:22,27,29). Was he correct?

The statements of Mr. Bush and Mr. Gore make me quite nervous, because Jesus was prone to lose his temper at times and was not above taking the law into his own hands. Once, He became angry at a fig tree and cursed it for having no figs on it, even though it was not the season for figs (Matthew 11:12-14). When He disapproved of what people were doing in the temple, He went inside it, and, using a whip He had platted for the purpose, drove them outside (John 2:13-16). Are these good examples for children? Is there a hidden, deeper meaning in these passages that I have missed? What is it? How do you know?

The "Allness" thinking that seems to me to evidence itself in some of the preaching of Jesus might bother some people. He taught that the Pharisees and Sadducees were a generation of vipers and headed for hell (Matthew 23: 29-33) and accused the Gentiles (Matthew 6:7) of praying, loud, eloquent prayers to be seen of men. Did no decent Pharisees or Sadducees exist, and were all Gentiles hypocrites? Some people might insist that he did not mean *all* of these people, but how do you know?

Perhaps the most disturbing fact about politicians promising to make decisions on the basis of what Jesus would do is the position of Christ on punishment. He taught that people who made mistakes should be burned eternally in hell for them (Matthew 18:9). This fate was in store not only for those who did bad deeds but was also reserved for people who did not have correct beliefs (Mark 16: 15-16). His position was that only those who agreed with Him deserved eternal life and that those who believed otherwise would burn forever. The statement attributed to Jesus, "I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes unto the Father but by me" (John 14:6) seems to imply that the population of hell will be fairly crowded. Have I missed something?

It is no wonder that the two leading candidates for the Presidency are strong supporters of "capital punishment," a euphemism for the practice of killing criminals judged by a handful of people to be totally evil. We already have the silly and barbaric "Three-Strikes-and-You-are-Out" law. What is coming next?

### **The Irritating Questions General Semanticists Ask**

Wendell Johnson (1946, p.59) taught us the importance of asking two troublesome questions: "What do you mean?", and "How do you know?" Because we cannot know what the Jesus question means, because there is no context involved, (What would Jesus do about what?) and have no way to find a reliable answer to it, the question on the Jesus bracelet seems to be one of those quandary-precipitating questions that have no answers (Johnson, 1946, pp. 52-57).

Using statements in documents to justify or condemn an action often creates remarkable situations. In Texas, we believe that the constitution gives us the right to carry a gun, in fact, as many as we can possibly move around with. You can get concealed-weapons permit that allows you to carry as many handguns as you can conceal, and concealed they must be. It is against the

law to carry these weapons in such a way as to reveal their presence. Is this what the Second Amendment means? Who knows? That is what it means in our state.

To many citizens, the First Amendment permits public schools to *force* children to pray in school. To me, this interpretation seems to require the state to mandate the practice of theism. Many people are so very upset by the current stand of the Supreme Court on this issue that they want a new amendment that specifically allows required prayer in the schools.

I have seen no examples of the prayers that would be required, however, and that particular issue might present problems for school boards throughout the country, and any required prayer would be forcing theism on students, it seems to me. Am I right?

### **Solutions?**

Some people argue that we need to interpret the Constitution by determining what the Founding Fathers meant when they wrote it. The fact that they have all been dead for many years makes this a challenging task. I have met a few women who would like to question the Apostle Paul personally about his commandment that women should "be in submission to their husbands" and his decree that "women should not teach in church." The question might be stated "Just WHAT do you mean?" and "Just HOW do YOU know?"

Attempting to behave according to rules and laws stated in written "Final-Word" documents is difficult if not impossible, but what are we to do? Should we burn the Bible and abolish the Constitution? I think not.

What does occur seems to me is this: scriptures and constitutions, etc., come to be interpreted in ways that promote the best interests of people in present circumstances in the light of current knowledge. Enlightened clergy, so as to avoid legalism and fundamentalism, usually "clarify" meanings of the scriptures to bring them up-to-date (Rosten, p. 149). In the United States, at least, the political process works against enforcing or permitting what citizens view as extreme interpretations of the Constitution by the Supreme Court, so that it eventually means what most people believe it should mean. In spite of the opposition of some people to this practice, we had better continue to interpret these and other important documents in ways that make the pursuit of happiness, in our day, less frustrating. We had better be opposed to legalistic interpretations of them, if we do not want them to be thrown in the garbage pail.

Legalism seems to me to be based on the position that words are containers of meaning, and that when you know the words, you know the meaning. This theory does not fit the facts. The more a person knows and understands, for example, the more (or less) meaningful written statements are for him, because when he reads, he *understands* through projection.

On the way home from church in years gone by, my parents and I used to express wonder about how Brother Jones got so much out of the verse that he took for his text. We did not understand that what we heard was what *he put into it*. This is a difficult point to understand and a more difficult one to teach.

## **In Conclusion**

To spend a lot of time worrying about the implications of children wearing a simple little bracelet might seem foolish to many, but that little trinket represents to me the widespread ignorance in our country of how languages do and do not work. I do not think, however, that you will have a problem appreciating the difficulties that a President of the United States wearing one of these might create for the country. I have no idea how much suffering the belief that words contain meaning has caused or is causing us today, but I believe that it is one of the major roots of the tree of human misery.

We need to keep hacking away at it.

## **References**

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