



A Biblically based commentary on current issues that impact *you*

The "W.W.J.D.?" Phenomenon Evangelism or Liberal Ethical System?

by Ryan Habbena

We've all seen 'em. They have been *the* "fashion fad" of many in and outside the church over the last few years. They began to appear on wrists in the mid-90's, and the "W.W.J.D.?" craze is still going strong. These bracelets abound to the point where its hard to watch a professional sport without seeing them on the wrist of at least one of the competitors.

For the few who *haven't* been exposed to this widespread phenomenon, "W.W.J.D.?" is an acronym for "What Would Jesus Do?" The purported purpose of these bracelets is this: that one would be reminded to pattern one's life after the example of Jesus. When encountered with life's dilemmas, one is to look at their bracelet and ask themselves the question "W.W.J.D.?" for ethical guidance. While, undoubtedly, some common good has come from this movement, there is a need for the Evangelical church, who adhere to essentials of the historic Christian faith, to understand the historical origin of this contemporary fad.

The Liberal Undertones of "W.W.J.D.?"

In the 1890's, a man by the name of Charles Sheldon penned the famous book *In His Steps*. *In His Steps* is a novel that follows several fictitious people from various backgrounds in their quest to follow Sheldon's ethical model. In the novel, Sheldon's characters are challenged with ethical situations in which the overarching question is continually asked: "What Would Jesus Do?" Thus, it is from this novel that both the ethical system and promotion of such (i.e. "W.W.J.D.?" bracelets) are derived.

However, Charles Sheldon was not one who clung to the historic essentials of the Christian faith. Such beliefs as the deity of Christ, the virgin birth, and the resurrection, were *at best* seen in an apathetic way in Sheldon's ministry. Timothy Miller, in his biography of Charles Sheldon, makes the following observations: "Yet, Sheldon was no conservative; he was, for example, capable of jettisoning parts of the Bible he found less than useful. He hinted at skepticism of doctrines many conservatives would find essential - the virgin birth, to name one - and readily accepted higher criticism of the Bible."¹

Miller further states: "Theologically, there is no way to classify Sheldon other than as a liberal . . . Sheldon managed to stay out of the bruising fray between liberals and conservatives throughout his lifetime. At the peak of the battle, in the 1920's, the prolific

pen of Sheldon was silent on the issue. Nowhere in His writings is there to be found a comment on the Scopes trial, for example, or on Harry Emerson Fosdick's polemics, although he believed in evolution and was not far from Fosdick on many issues."²

Therefore, the "W.W.J.D." ethical system, being pioneered by a man who *at best* neglected many essential doctrines of the Christian faith, has distinct liberal roots. The question then arises: Do we find liberal undertones within the "W.W.J.D." ethical system?

A Flawed Ethical System

For those who adhere to the Scriptures as their ultimate and final authority, it must be acknowledged that there is a fundamental difference between Jesus of Nazareth and the rest of humanity. Jesus of Nazareth is God-incarnate. Every other human being that ever existed (and will ever exist) does not fall into this ontological³ category. Therefore, Jesus Christ is *the* unique One. Since there is a fundamental distinction between His nature and ours, the "W.W.J.D." ethical system will often fail. Allow me to give two concrete examples.

1) There are several instances throughout the Scripture where we find Jesus receiving and accepting worship (**Matthew 2:11, 14:33, 28:9, 28:17, John 9:38, and Revelation 5:14**). Yet, we are told in the book of Acts, when Peter visited the household of Cornelius, "it came about that Peter entered, Cornelius met him, and fell at his feet and worshiped him. But Peter raised him up, saying, 'Stand up; I too am just a man'" (**Acts 10:25-26**). Obviously, Peter did not do "what Jesus would do" in this situation.

2) In Matthew chapter 23 Jesus pronounces His woes upon the scribes and Pharisees of His day. Jesus, the righteous Judge (**John 5:22**), peers into the hearts of the Pharisees and proclaims: "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside they are full of robbery and self-indulgence . . . Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which on the outside appear beautiful, but inside they are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness. . . You serpents, you brood of vipers, how shall you escape the sentence of hell?" (**Matthew 23:25,27,33**). Since we are finite and sinful, we cannot judge as Jesus did (**John 5:22**). Nor do we know what lies in man as Jesus does (**John 2:25**). Therefore, again, if presented with this ethical situation we should *not* do "what Jesus would do."

While the above examples may come off as somewhat "knit-picky," they well demonstrate the liberal undertones of this ethical system. The liberal roots of this system deny the deity of Christ. A denial of the deity of Christ is a denial of an essential belief of the Christian faith.⁴ Because of the ontological difference between Jesus and the rest of humanity, we must acknowledge that, when confronted with certain ethical situations, our prescribed actions will often not coincide with the actions of our Lord.

What is True Evangelism?

A couple of years ago I was listening to a Christian radio "Talk Show." The topic that was on the "docket" for the day was "Christian Retailing." The round table panel consisted of a manager of a Christian retailing company, the vice-president of the same company, and a moderator. Eventually, they took phone calls, and one caller posed the question, which I paraphrase: "What about all of the 'Jesus junk?' I see all of these little nick-knacks that say 'God loves you' or 'W.W.J.D.?' that are sold at a 60 - 80% mark-up. How does one argue that this is a good 'Christian' thing to do?" The eventual answer came from the Vice President of this particular retailer. He answered, and again I paraphrase, "Whatever means we can use to get the Gospel out, we will use it."

This answer is indicative of the misguided notion of evangelism that largely permeates the contemporary church. Plastering a "God Loves You" sticker on the bumper of a car is *not* true evangelism. Giving an acquaintance a pencil with the acronym "P.U.S.H." (i.e. Pray Until Something Happens - another faddish acronym) etched on it is *not* true evangelism. And passing out "W.W.J.D.?" bracelets is *not* true evangelism.

While the true and living God is omnipotent and can use any thing He wishes to draw people closer to Him, the only message that He has proclaimed through which He will save humanity is the message of the *cross*. Over the last year I have addressed such movements as "The Seeker Sensitive Movement," "The Signs and Wonders Movement" and now the "W.W.J.D.? Movement." While all of these movements are distinct with diverse roots, a common thread is evident through them all - There is neglect of the cross of Christ. Where there is no cross, there is no true Gospel. I feel as if I am on the fringes of redundancy (in reference to my previous articles), yet I am led to quote 1 Corinthians chapters 1 and 2 again:

"For the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God . . . For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified. I was with you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling, and my message and my preaching were not with persuasive words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith may not rest on the wisdom of man but on the power of God." (1 Corinthians 1:18, 2:1-5)

What has become evident to me through my interaction with several contemporary movements within the church is there is a disturbing neglect of the heart of the Gospel - The glorious work of our God and Savior on the cross. We are not saved through our own attempted obedience to an ethical system. We are saved through faith in the finished work of Jesus Christ. Whatever common good that may come from it, passing out "W.W.J.D.?" bracelets is not true evangelism. Preaching the cross *is*.

How Then Shall We Live

The above suggests the question: "How then should we live in obedience to God? In what way should I, as a Christian, emulate Christ?" What must first be established is our condition apart from God's work of regeneration. Humanity is dead in trespasses and sin. In Romans Paul pronounces this point twice: "All have turned aside, together they have become useless; there is none who does good, there is not even one" (**Romans 3:12**). And, "the mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God; for it does not subject itself to the law of God, for it is not even able to do, and those who are in the flesh cannot please God" (**Romans 8:7-8**).

We *can't* do "what Jesus would do" (in a moral sense) without the power of God changing our hearts and freeing us from the power of sin that holds our will captive. It is only when God's heavenly gift is bestowed upon one's soul that one is given "everything pertaining to life and godliness" (**2 Peter 2:3**).

However, it must be affirmed that we do find commonality between our Lord and humanity. Hebrews 2:17 proclaims, "Therefore, He [Jesus] had to be made like His brethren in all things, so that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people." We are to strive to follow Jesus' example in His unwavering *obedience* to the Father, for "*the one who says he abides in Him ought himself to walk in the same manner He walked*" (**1 John 2:6**). Therefore, we *must* emulate Jesus in His obedience to the revealed will and sovereign plan of God.

Even though there are distinct areas of commonality, there is still a problem with *simply* asking ourselves, "What Would Jesus Do?" in these situations. We need to *know* God's righteous commands, and they are *not* found in our own intuition. For "the heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick; who can understand it?" (**Jeremiah 17:9**). Rather, His righteous commands are discovered in His inspired, inerrant word. Again, simply asking ourselves: "What Would Jesus Do?," and then only relying on our own intuition as to what this would be, is another subtle indicator of the liberal undertones of the "W.W.J.D.?" ethical system. Liberalism, by and large, minimizes the sufficiency of the Scriptures for "training in righteousness" (**2 Timothy 3:16**).

Conclusion

While much else could be said, space does not permit a further exploration regarding this contemporary fad and the related question of Christian retailing. Yet, this may well be fodder for a future article.

We can ask ourselves "W.W.J.D.?" all we want. However, in regards to obedience to the righteous commands of God, without the regeneration and grace that proceeds from our sacrificial Lamb and great High Priest, and without abiding in Him and His word, there

will indeed be no "doing what Jesus would do." Our focus must remain upon Jesus Christ, the risen Lord of all. For we are dependent upon His divine grace to conform us into His glorious image.

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End Notes

1. Timothy Miller, *Following In His Steps: A Biography of Charles M. Sheldon*, (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1987) xiii.
 2. Ibid. See CIC #56, *Robert Schuller and The Seeker Sensitive Church* by Bob DeWaay, for a further treatment on Fosdick and his influence on 20th Century Christianity.
 3. *Ontological* is a term that refers to "nature" or "being."
 4. In John 8:24, Jesus declares, literally translated, "unless you believe that I AM, you will die in your sins." This is powerful attestation for the necessity of a belief in the deity of Christ in reference to a genuine faith.
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