

The background of the cover is a vibrant yellow, densely populated with numerous 'DON'T PANIC' signs. These signs are rendered in a dark red or orange color and are scattered across the entire surface, some overlapping and some partially cut off by the edges. The signs vary in orientation, creating a sense of chaotic movement and visual noise. The central text is printed in a bold, black, sans-serif font, standing out prominently against the busy background.

**HOW TO
TALK ABOUT
JESUS
WITHOUT
LOOKING
LIKE AN
IDIOT**

**A PANIC-FREE GUIDE TO
HAVING NATURAL CONVERSATIONS
ABOUT YOUR FAITH**

ANDY BANNISTER

I love this book. It is simple, practical, and fun. The chapter on asking good questions is worth the price of the whole book. If you're looking for a way to have more meaningful spiritual conversations with people, *How to Talk about Jesus without Looking like an Idiot* will do exactly as the title suggests.

SEAN McDOWELL, PHD, professor at Biola University, popular YouTuber, and the author or editor of over twenty books, including *A Rebel's Manifesto*

With his unique blend of humour, wit, and incisive analysis, Andy helps us navigate the opportunities and pitfalls of sharing faith today. This accessible book is a must-read for all Christians who want to talk about Jesus with greater confidence and winsomeness.

AMY ORR-EWING, PHD, author, speaker, and theologian

We all want to live in such a way as believers that our words and our lives match so that our walk is the same as our talk. But the subject where we see the greatest gap between what Christians *say* is vital and how their lives *reflect* that is evangelism. That's why Andy Bannister's book is so refreshing. His humor is infectious, but don't let it fool you. There is a wealth of wisdom and insight in these pages, with some of the most honest, practical, and helpful tools I've seen in a book on evangelism. Read it and laugh at Andy's wit, then put his teaching into practice. The Good News in Jesus is too good not to tell, and Andy will help you.

ED STETZER, PHD, Wheaton College

Having worked with Andy Bannister on various evangelistic events for years, I can confidently say that he knows how to

talk about Jesus without looking like an idiot. In this book, he teaches the rest of us how to do the same. Besides being highly entertaining, this book is an accessible treasure trove of real-world insight and practical tips. If you love Jesus and want to share that love naturally and effectively with others, this is a must-read and reread!

ANDY STEIGER, PHD, founder and president of Apologetics Canada and author of *Reclaimed*

There is an idiom we use in the UK, “to throw the kitchen sink” at something. It means to try everything; exhaust all energy and resources in order to achieve something or to solve a problem. . . . Andy “throws the kitchen sink” into evangelism and apologetics. . . . Once again Andy is giving his very best to what matters most to him, helping people like you and me introduce others to Jesus. I honestly can’t recommend this book highly enough. . . . There are over three hundred books on evangelism and apologetics around my study, and as a resource to the church, I’d confidently put this in the top five. From new Christians to seasoned pilgrims, this is a wonderfully emotive and empowering read.

MITCH CROWN, evangelist/CEO at Crown Jesus Ministries, Ireland

Not for the first time, Andy Bannister has written a book which is as witty as it is accessible. His modest tone and laconic style undergird a razor-sharp mind and robust intellect. It’s always a pleasure to read his work and to feel excited about where this book may end up.

ANDY KIND, comedian and author

Plastic dinosaurs, *The Princess Bride*, airborne deck-chairs—this how-to on evangelism has it all. But don't let the gentle humour fool you. Andy has produced an accessible, insightful, and culturally savvy text on sharing the gospel in our increasingly hostile, post-Christian setting. But it's not just how he, with all his years of experience, can do that—but how we can too. Andy demonstrates a love for the lost and a love for the people of God as they navigate these tough times in which gospel fruit seems less likely and the chance of being viewed as a bigot or weirdo more likely. Most of all, he shows a love for Jesus that drives the desire to evangelise in the first place. This book takes modern objections to the gospel seriously yet demonstrates how, through clear strategies, biblical instruction, and helpful examples, these objections can be met. Written in plainspeak, it offers compelling reasons as to why, when done thoughtfully, the good news “hits different” in a culture which thinks it knows why it has left Christianity behind yet can't come up with a satisfying alternative.

STEPHEN McALPINE, Director of Cultural Engagement for City to City Australia

With humor, wit, and an unsinkable sense of spiritual buoyancy, Andy Bannister unpacks practical ways to share your faith with the people around you, and he peppers these pages with real-life stories that bring his principles to life. This book will help launch you on the unparalleled adventure of influencing others for Christ.

MARK MITTELBERG, author of *Contagious Faith* and executive director of the Lee Strobel Center for Evangelism and Applied Apologetics at Colorado Christian University

In my experience, telling other people about Jesus is one of the greatest causes of anxiety for the average Christian. But fear not, help is at hand. Delivered with Andy's inimitable sense of humour, this book is a brilliant guide to sharing your faith naturally and confidently. It won't magically turn you into a super evangelist (as Andy explains, they don't really exist in real life), but it will help you to face your fears, start conversations, and simply talk to people about Jesus . . . without looking like an idiot.

JUSTIN BRIERLEY, author, broadcaster, and host of the *Unbelievable?* show

Is it fitting for evangelism to be, dare we say, enjoyable? In my experience, Christians can unintentionally take the delight out of evangelism by the way we approach it. Enter Andy Bannister, whose jovial jesting and humorous life stories, combined with a depth of knowledge and experience, demonstrate a true compassion for, *and enjoyment of*, his fellow humans. His book is overflowing with evangelistic expertise alongside well-crafted suggestions that are simple to implement and easy to remember, encouraging and empowering you to naturally share your life and faith with others.

MARY JO SHARP, assistant professor of apologetics at Houston Christian University and author of *Why I Still Believe: A Former Atheist's Reckoning with the Bad Reputation Christians Give a Good God*

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How to Talk about Jesus without Looking like an Idiot: A Panic-Free Guide to Having Natural Conversations about Your Faith

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Foreword

AS A NEW CHRISTIAN WORKING among spiritually skeptical colleagues at a major newspaper, I refrained from telling others about Jesus. I didn't want to embarrass myself. I was scared I'd get stumped by a question. I was afraid of what might happen to my career if I became known as the newsroom's "Holy Roller." The only hint I gave about my newfound faith was to decline my boss's invitation to go golfing on Sunday because I'd be at church.

Then one hectic day when everyone was losing their tempers because of all the breaking news, my boss came over to my desk. "Strobel, how did you get through the day without blowing your top?" he asked. Then, apparently suspecting a link between my behavior and church, he added, "What's this Christianity thing to you?"

I froze. Nobody had ever asked me that before. My mind raced. Maybe I could dismiss the whole thing with a joke. *Christianity? Hey, what happens in church stays in church!* Maybe I could pretend I didn't hear him over the din of the newsroom. *Yeah, it's been a crazy day. Man, look at the time! I've gotta get home to my wife!*

That's when the uninvited words of the apostle Paul coursed through my mind: "I am not ashamed of the gospel" (Romans 1:16). *Great! I fumed. Just what I needed—a biblical guilt trip!*

Then I made a split-second decision to take a spiritual risk. “You really want to know?” I asked. “Let’s go into your office.”

Behind closed doors, we talked for forty-five minutes—well, actually, I talked. I was really nervous and totally unprepared. In my own sincere but inept way, I stumbled through describing how I met Jesus and the difference he made in my life. I feared I was coming off like an idiot—but then something amazing happened.

My boss didn’t laugh. He didn’t make fun of me. He didn’t nervously try to change the topic or make excuses to leave the room. Instead, he listened intently. By the end, he was hanging on every word.

At the same time, I felt like I was going to burst on the inside. It instantly became clear to me that nothing was as urgent or exciting as what I was doing at that very moment. I felt as if eternity were holding its breath. Emerging from his office, I was thoroughly invigorated, as if the air were carbonated. There are no words to adequately describe the thrill I felt in having been sued by God to share his message of hope with someone far from him.

Have you experienced that joy? If you want to but feel hindered by the kind of fears that prompted me to keep my mouth shut for so long, then you’ve picked up the perfect book. With wit and wisdom, my friend Andy Bannister will take you on a journey of discovery to help you understand how sharing Jesus with others can be natural and effective.

Through his real-world insights and compelling stories, Andy provides practical advice that you can put to use starting today. It’s amazing how our fears and hesitations dissipate when we acquire simple techniques that we can weave into our everyday encounters. When we understand the keys to asking good questions, for

instance, we find that conversations about Jesus can be stimulating and exciting, not scary and intimidating.

So read on with an open mind and heart. Have a highlighter handy. C'mon, you've always wanted to be a difference-maker for Christ! Here's your chance to learn and grow through Andy's godly coaching. Then make the decision that when God opens an opportunity, you'll make the choice to take a spiritual risk and share the best news on the planet.

Lee Strobel
Founding director,
Lee Strobel Center for Evangelism
and Applied Apologetics at
Colorado Christian University

CHAPTER 1

UNDERCOVER CHRISTIAN

I HAVE WORKED FOR SOME REMARKABLY strange people in my time, but none was so wonderfully and extravagantly eccentric as Professor Arthur Crump. He was my first boss and head of the psychiatry department at St. George's, the London hospital where I'd landed my first job after leaving school. When he wasn't shuffling up and down the corridors shoeless and wearing odd socks or talking lovingly to the rubber plant in his office (which for some reason was named Oswald), one of Arthur's hobbies was photography.

On one occasion, Arthur had decided it would be a capital idea to come into work before the crack of dawn, head up to the roof of the secure psychiatry ward, and take a picture of the sun rising over the river that wound through the hospital grounds. So there Arthur was at 4:00 a.m., equipped with his Nikon and a flask of

coffee, and sure enough, he took some quite impressive photographs. But then disaster struck! A gust of wind blew the fire door shut, and Arthur found himself stranded on the roof. This was in the days before mobile phones, so he sat and waited for somebody to arrive who could help to release him.

About 6:00 a.m., a milk delivery driver pulled into the hospital car park. Arthur leaned over the parapet and from three storeys up boomed, “Hello, my good man, I’m stuck on the roof!” The driver ignored him, and so Arthur tried again: “I’m stuck up here on the roof! Could you find somebody to let me out?”

The driver yelled back, “Not a chance, mate. You’re a raving lunatic!”

“No, no, you don’t understand,” Arthur shouted, “I’m actually the professor of psychiatry!”

“Yeah, mate, and I’m the queen of England!” came the reply as the driver climbed back into his truck and drove away, leaving Arthur stranded for two more hours until he was finally recognised and rescued.

For years, that story was repeated around our department to hoots of laughter, along with tales of the other strange things Arthur had done. “Olympic-level eccentric” or “Nice but *really* weird” were the kind of phrases his colleagues used to describe him.

And I was worried those same colleagues would conclude exactly the same thing about me if they knew my deepest secret—the secret I tried to hide during all my years working at St. George’s. Many of my colleagues at the hospital had literal skeletons in their cupboards, whereas I had a metaphorical one. I was not the queen of England or the professor of psychiatry. But I was a Christian.

Yes, I was a Christian—and not in some vague “I’m a Christian

because I was christened as a child and can remember one-and-a-half verses of ‘Jerusalem’¹ from singing hymns at school” sense of the word. No, I was a Christian in the incredibly serious and committed sense. Outside of work, I was very engaged in my local church, heavily involved with youth work and other activities. If you had asked me, I would have described my faith as the most important thing in my life.

But you would have struggled to spot that *inside* work.

At work, I played a game I came to think of as Undercover Christian, which I always thought would make a great movie title and would feature Christians sneaking around trying to never let slip to their colleagues what they really believed.² During my Monday to Friday workweek, I would have done *anything* to avoid being outed as a Christian.

Mondays were often the worst, because then there would be the What Did You Do on the Weekend question, and occasionally I’d slip up.

“How was your weekend, Andy?”

“Oh, it was great, on Sunday morning I went to a fantastic ch— ch— ch— cheese-making seminar.”

On another occasion I’d foolishly brought in a Christian book and was sitting in the staff canteen reading it as a colleague walked in.

“What’s that book you’re reading?” they asked.

“Which book? Oh, *this* book? *This* book? Ah, it’s, well, about— look! Look out the window! My word, is that a fish? Or is it a bird?”

I think the closest I ever came to having my Christian faith

¹ The answer to the first verse of this peculiarly British hymn is “No, they didn’t,” and the answer to the second is “Fetch it yourself.”

² When the British crime drama *Silent Witness* premiered, I confess that on first seeing the title I thought it was about Christians in the workplace. As a wit once remarked, “Many Christians are like arctic rivers—they have frozen mouths.”

outed at work happened one day when I accidentally dropped a large fax machine on my foot.³ Hopping around in agony and feeling the need to curse, but wanting to avoid swearing like a trooper, I shouted something inoffensive like “Bother!” My colleague eyed me suspiciously. “You’re not one of those weird religious types who think it’s wrong to swear?” she asked, narrowing her eyes. “Flipping heck, no!” I exclaimed. (As a Baptist, I thought that was pretty strong.)

Inwardly, all of this was tearing me to pieces. I spent years feeling incredibly guilty for being afraid of my Christian faith at work, for burying it away, for role-playing Undercover Christian. After all, weren’t Christians supposed to be brave and fearless? I’d grown up on stories of Christian heroes from the past, like Perpetua or Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who boldly proclaimed their faith in the face of threats and even death. Meanwhile, I couldn’t even face the banter around the water cooler. In the Scriptures, I would read passages like Ephesians 6, which talks about the belt of truth and the helmet of salvation. Meanwhile, my own spiritual attire seemed more akin to the flip-flops of fear, the socks of silence, and the underpants of uncertainty.

I especially struggled with the dissonance that characterised my life—the massive gap between living an active Christian life at home and at church, whilst at work I hid my light under a bowl, the bowl under a box, and the box in a locked filing cabinet stuck in a disused basement lavatory with a sign on the door saying, “Beware of the leopard!”

For six years at St. George’s Hospital I played Undercover Christian—and as it eventually turned out, I was not the only

³ Unfortunately, it turns out that fax don’t always care about your feelings.

one. At the leaving lunch that was organised when I moved on to another job, I got chatting with a woman who worked three doors down from me, and through discovering a mutual friend, we suddenly found out we were both Christians! She had also been playing Undercover Christian for the last six years, and thus I had no idea I hadn't been the only Christian in the department. I suspect there were others and that Undercover Christian wasn't a one-off movie; it was quite probably a multiseason box set.

The Foundations of Fear

So where had my nervousness about talking about my faith in Jesus at work come from? Why was it that I found it perfectly simple to talk to my colleagues about the weather, sports, or my hobbies,⁴ but when it came to the most important thing in my life—my faith in Jesus—I clammed up more tightly than an oyster with lockjaw? What exactly was the problem? Looking back, I think one contributing factor was that most of my experiences or models of sharing my faith had been terribly unhelpful—or in some cases, downright terrifying.

Falling into the latter category, for example, was the time in my late teens when our church pastor had decided it would be a marvellous idea to “get the youth group involved in evangelism.” (Phrases like “young and enthusiastic,” “creative and energetic,” and “cannon fodder” were mentioned.) And so, those of us in the youth group first tried sharing our faith by means of drama skits so painfully bad that one old lady took pity and gave us some money to go buy ice creams. Finally, we were dispatched door to door, tasked with inviting people to the Christmas service. Among

⁴ “I love collecting stamps,” I once explained to a coworker. “What a brilliant hobby,” she said. “Philately will get you nowhere,” I replied.

the highlights of that particular adventure were trying to talk to somebody whilst their dogs snarled at us angrily (“They really are harmless and friendly when you get to know them. Grip! Wolf! Fang! Stop chewing the nice man’s leg!”) and knocking on a door that was opened by a four-hundred-pound man who was entirely naked except for a small purple beret.

Other examples of evangelism I had seen suffered from the opposite problem: they were far too impressive. In 1989, Billy Graham had come to the UK and spoken at Crystal Palace Athletics Stadium in London, a few miles from where I lived. The weather did what British weather normally does and rained dismally, but Billy preached his heart out whilst the rain dripped steadily off his nose—after which thousands responded and gave their lives to Christ. In the very back I sat and watched, impressed, concluding that to be effective at telling others about Jesus you had to be (a) an incredibly gifted orator and (b) waterproof.

I also found it intimidating to have one or two friends who were very clearly gifted in this way. My friend Michael, for example, seemed able to simply sneeze and people became Christians. Every time we met, he would have some remarkable new story, my favourite of which was a long-winded recounting of how he’d managed to lead his dentist to Christ whilst his dentist was performing a root canal on him.

And so, as a young Christian, it seemed patently obvious. Telling others about Jesus was for specialists. It was for professionals. And it wasn’t for me.

Over the years, I have come to realise that I’m not alone in all of this. That fear of talking about our faith at work and the feeling that it isn’t something for ordinary people is widespread in the church. A great many Christians are afraid of talking about

Jesus—and feel guilty, foolish, or inadequate because of this. Lots of pastors I speak to back this up, too, often telling me how difficult it can be to get people excited or engaged when it comes to sharing their faith. As one Canadian pastor put it to me, “I struggle to get volunteers for anything related to evangelism. To be honest, it’s easier to find volunteers to clean the church lavatories. With a toothbrush.”

The Way Ahead

Thankfully, in the twenty or so years since I worked at St. George’s Hospital and played my daily game of Undercover Christian, I have learnt a lot, not least from having had the privilege of learning from dozens of Christian men and women who have figured out ways by which sharing our faith can be less frightening. And so, as the saying goes, I wish I knew *then* what I know *now*. If I had a time machine, I would love to go back and say a few things to my twenty-three-year-old self. Probably beginning with “Don’t try to look cool by wearing black turtlenecks—with your complexion, you look like a small, startled badger.”

More seriously, I’d want to share a few lessons with my younger self that I have learnt since then. For example, I’d want to say, “You’re not alone in finding it tough to share your faith.” (I really did think it was just me who was having such a hard time.) I would want to explain that telling others about Jesus doesn’t have to be intimidating, not least because there are really simple, basic, and practical tools that *anybody* can use to help them do it more naturally. And above all, I would want to point out to my younger self that God really can use anybody, not just specialists, as his ambassadors.

Hopefully the twenty-three-year-old me would have listened

attentively and not died of shock at seeing his future self, because that would have caused a time paradox comparable to the plot of *Back to the Future*. But if my younger self had asked me to justify especially that last claim, I'd have said one word: "the prophet Jonah." Admittedly that's three words but hey, I've just travelled in time and you're nit-picking over things like that?

Anyway, back to Jonah. Have you ever thought what a terrible evangelist he was? God commands him to go to Nineveh, but Jonah is such a racist, he doesn't want to preach to *those* people. And when God sends him anyway, he jumps on a boat headed in quite literally the opposite direction. Only after a violent storm and a few days stuck inside a giant fish does Jonah, grudgingly, go to Nineveh, where he preaches what is, quite frankly, a rubbish sermon (and short: just five words in Hebrew!). Yet despite his cowardice, racism, and laziness, God uses Jonah to save an entire city full of people. As Glen Scrivener puts it,

The great evangelist of the Bible is not Jonah, it's the Lord. And that's good news because by the Spirit, the Lord continues to reach out through rubbish evangelists like Jonah, like me, like you. As you seek to share your faith with others today, take heart: nothing can thwart God's gospel mission to the ends of the earth—not even you can thwart it. Because "Salvation comes from the Lord." (Jonah 2:9)⁵

I find those words deeply encouraging. Not even you or I—however rubbish evangelists or fearful we may think we are—can

⁵ Glen Scrivener, *Reading Between the Lines: Old Testament Daily Readings*, Volume 1 (Leyland, UK: 10Publishing, 2018), 469.

muck up God's plans. But if we let him, God can work through even us.

All that is what I would love to share with my twenty-three-year-old self. Alas, my plan to travel back in time suffers from just two flaws. First, that time travel has not yet been invented and is probably impossible. And second, that time travel has not yet been invented and is probably impossible. (Admittedly that's the same problem, but it's such a major problem, it was worth listing twice.)

However, what I decided I *could* do was write the book I wish I had been able to read back then and, in the absence of rifts or rips in the fabric of space-time, at least pass it on to people it might encourage and equip. Helping others learn to overcome their fears of sharing their faith is, in fact, what I've been doing for the last decade, as I've taught the material in this book to tens of thousands of Christians across Canada, the United States, and Europe—Christians who are not specialists, just men and women who, like you and me, would love to be able to feel they can talk about Jesus without looking like an idiot.

If any of what I've described above resonates with you—if you're nervous or fearful of speaking about your faith at work, or simply don't know how to start talking about Jesus to your friends—I hope that *How to Talk about Jesus without Looking like an Idiot* will do four things for you. First, I hope it will build some confidence (and trust me, if *I* can grow in confidence, then there is hope for *anybody*). Second, I hope it will give you some practical tools you can use in everyday conversations—not just *theory*, but actual tools you can use. Third, I hope it will get you *excited* to talk about Jesus with your friends and colleagues. Fourth, I hope it will encourage you, through the stories and examples, that God

can use *you*. And I hope it will do all of those things in a friendly, funny, down-to-earth, and reassuring way. That's why I persuaded the artist who designed the cover to plaster the words "DON'T PANIC" on the front in large, friendly letters.

But when it comes to sharing our faith, many of us *do* panic. We're nervous, and we're afraid. So let's begin by asking, What *precisely* are we afraid of? Because the first step to tackling our fears about evangelism is to bring them into the light and name them.