

The Well Illustration

For several years now, as I've talked with people about the good news of Jesus Christ, I've observed that many gospel presentations are ineffective. I think this is because we have a "reaping" mentality. We tend to think of evangelism as an event requiring the person to make an immediate decision for Christ. Unfortunately, not everyone who is willing to listen to us and discuss what Scripture says is ready to make that decision.

People are influenced by a number of deeply rooted cultural concepts (moral relativism, for example) that conflict with the claims of Scripture. The result of these cultural strongholds is that people are blinded to their sinfulness and need for Christ.



As I thought about this, I became convinced of the importance of viewing evangelism more as a process than an event. This would mean that I needed to creatively "sow" the gospel in a variety of ways over a period of time. Since the evangelistic tools I was familiar with were designed for reaping instead of sowing, I developed a method I call The Well Illustration. It has proven to be an effective way to move a person closer to a point of decision for Christ.

The primary purpose of The Well Illustration is to expose an individual, through the power of the Word, to his sinfulness and need for Christ. It does this by helping the person see his belief systems and the idols he has set up in his life.

In addition, The Well Illustration helps the believer to understand his friend and gives him specific things to pray for. It also allows him to share his life openly and honestly with his friend.

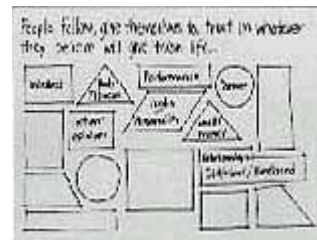
I lead up to sharing The Well by gently taking the initiative. Whether my relationship with someone is two weeks old or two years old, I look for openings in our conversations that will lead naturally to presenting The Well. Sometimes I ask, "What is your philosophy of life?" or "Does _____ really fulfill you?" In some situations, I'll simply ask if I can show them an illustration that talks about what people trust in and why.

When a person gives me the go-ahead, here is how I present The Well Illustration.

Where Do You Find Life?

Begin the illustration by writing on the top of the paper, "People follow, give themselves to, trust in whatever they believe will give them life." Explain that by the word *life*, you mean whatever people believe are their deepest needs—security, satisfaction, respect, significance, love.

Next, draw a number of boxes of different shapes and sizes. Take turns writing in the boxes what both of you see society, friends, or yourselves trusting in to meet the needs you've just described.



To break the ice, and to be certain your friend understands what you are asking him to do, you

will probably want to fill in the first box. It's important not to dominate the discussion or explain too much about the illustration at this time. For the individual to see truth, he has to discover it himself. This is a brainstorming session. Each box provides a discussion opportunity that can challenge and influence the person's thinking.

As you take turns filling in the boxes, mention that Christ is the way you find "life."

Once you have exhausted the possibilities, write out Jer. 2:13 below the boxes. This verse will summarize what both of you have discovered by filling in the boxes. Now is the time to explain that the boxes you have just filled in represent the cisterns (or wells) from the verse in Jeremiah.

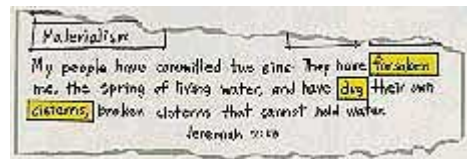
Forsake

Next, highlight key words from Jer. 2:13 and discuss what they mean. Start by underlining or drawing a box around the word *forsaken* and ask the person to define the term. Write down his definition and add to it if anything is missing. Be sure to include the idea that forsaking means choosing to abandon or leave something that is true.



Dug

Underline the word *dug* next. Ask the question, "What is involved in digging a well (or cistern, as the verse in Jeremiah calls it)?" It takes a lot of hard work! As we dig our own cisterns, we naturally become arrogant and focused on our performance. At this point ask, "Do you think people believe that the quality and quantity of their digging will fulfill them?" Point out that there are many influences in society—our performance, our profession, our pleasures—that encourage us to find life apart from Christ.



Cistern

Now underline the word *cisterns*. Ask your friend to define the word. If he needs help, describe the difference between a cistern and a spring. (A cistern is a well that is unable to produce its own water. It can only hold water that is put into it.)

Explain that any cistern we dig has the capability of becoming an idol. Ask the person to define the word *idol*. Help him see that an idol is an object, person, or belief that we allow to control us, or anything that we submit ourselves to follow outside of our worship of God.



This is a good opportunity to give an example from your own life of a time when you ran to a "well" that couldn't satisfy you. You can also ask your friend to select a "well" from the boxes he has filled in and describe a person who is wrapped up in that idol.

Broken

Underline the word *broken* and draw a crack through every well except the one with the word *Christ*. Discuss how people invest themselves in these wells, yet are never able to keep the wells full. Explain that leakage is inevitable. No matter how much or how carefully you pour your life into these cisterns, they can never satisfy you or remain full. We are deceived if we believe there are no cracks in these wells or that these wells can satisfy our basic needs.

Again, you have the opportunity to share how you have bought into this deception at one time or another. Your vulnerability can set the tone for reciprocal sharing, and the door will remain open for future dialogue.

We often feel the need to hide our sinfulness, past or present, in order to appear "godly." However, honesty about who we are, where we've been, and where we want to go is attractive when we focus on how Christ has met our needs and delivered us from the wells that couldn't satisfy. Humility, centered on the works of Christ, stands in contrast with self-righteousness, which is centered on the works of the flesh.

You should mention that many of the "wells" aren't intrinsically wrong. They become wrong and damaging when we put them in the place of Jesus.

The Spring of Living Water

Underline *the spring of living water*. This phrase speaks of Christ and His claims of being the only well that can satisfy man's basic needs. Once again, you should talk about the difference between "the spring of living water" and a "cistern." A spring is a continuous source of water that is ready for drinking without endless digging and filling.



Ask the person, "What do you believe are man's basic needs?" You may hear a variety of answers. Be sure to affirm only those answers that are biblical. (When a person gives an incorrect answer, I often simply nod and say "Hmmm," or "That's an interesting thought.")

Summarize your discussion by saying that you believe man's basic needs are forgiveness and a right relationship with God (Col. 1:20–21). These needs can only be met through the death of Christ on the Cross. He died to take on Himself the punishment for our sins. Only He can satisfy our desire to be at peace with God. Until we have a personal relationship with Him, we are incomplete and unfulfilled.

As you close the discussion, go back to the numerous wells on the paper. Write your name and list what you shared earlier about the "cisterns" Christ exposed in your life. Then point to the box (or well) that you filled in with the word Christ. Explain that when we believe we can meet our own needs, we are unwilling to let Christ give us life (Jn. 5:40). Talk about your response to the cisterns that didn't satisfy—that you repented of looking to them for life and that you turned to Christ. Also

tell your friend that as you follow Christ, this diagram is a good checklist to reveal areas you might continue to struggle with and periodically need to surrender to Christ again.

Now write down your friend's name and ask him to identify any cisterns in his life. Here are some questions you might ask:

- + Why do you try to meet your needs in these wells?
- + What have you learned about these wells?
- + Do you know what prevents you from going to the well of Christ?

Keep in mind that The Well Illustration is more beneficial as a sowing tool than as a reaping tool. For many, this will be the first time they have verbalized their belief system and questioned its validity. Invariably, people will refer to the illustration weeks and even months after it has been shared with them. This interest gives you a platform for future discussions concerning the "wells" people dig and can even be a bridge into the gospel. It also gives you permission to find specific answers from Scripture the next time you meet with that person.

After I share The Well Illustration with someone, I ask them if they'd like to get together the following week for lunch or a Coke to talk more about Christ as the only well that can provide them a continuous source of living water.

As I have shared The Well Illustration, inevitably the person will have questions about Christ and often some misunderstandings about Him. Those questions take time to answer. There are no short-cuts. Sharing the gospel will generally mean establishing a relationship that develops over time into an open and honest interchange of ideas. The goal is to keep Christ the focus of their search for life.

