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BREAKING DOWN THE BARRIERS: TRANSFORMING OUR RELATIONSHIPS WITH SEEKERS

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One of the most serious problems Christians face as “living epistles” (see 2 Cor. 3:2–3) among non-Christians is our relationships with them. This sounds obvious, if not clichéd, but as G. K. Chesterton said, familiarity breeds inattention. Sometimes it’s important to revisit what’s staring us in the face.

Whether one is a fairly new believer or a seasoned apologist for the faith, Christians commonly complain of banging their heads against a brick wall while talking with non-Christians. With the tremendous increase of non-Christian spiritual seekers in the West, Christians continually discover new “universes next door” and bump up against all sorts of strange viewpoints. With conversations easily degenerating into arguments, it’s tempting to want to give up.

“My boyfriend’s mother is an astrologer,” a young woman told me. “She wants to read my horoscope and compare it to her son’s to see if we’re compatible. I tried talking with her about this, but I’m not getting anywhere.” This complaint is typical of the earnest cries for help I’ve heard. “My aunt is a spiritualist. She thinks her spiritual gifts are the same as those in 1 Corinthians 12. What should I say to her?” “There’s a psychic up the road from us who likes to predict things about the neighborhood children. When I finally got up the nerve to tell her that I didn’t want her doing this to my children, she told me I was filled with ‘negative psychic energy!’”

These statements are glimpses into many alternative spiritual universes, and the question from Christians is usually, “How do I answer them?” This is an essential question, certainly, but it can carry a bit of mischief. In our zeal to provide biblical answers to alternative spiritualities and hammer out a defense of the faith to non-Christians, we may pound our listeners to pieces in the process. By focusing only on answers, responses, and explanations, it’s easy to start treating non-Christians as if they were mere things or objects — that is, projects we are working on. People pick up on this. It’s depersonalizing and offensive, and they get turned off to us, not to mention to our message. Think of how irritating it can be when the Jehovah’s Witnesses come a-knockin’. It’s often easy to tell that they aren’t really interested in getting to know you. You’re just an address on their to-do list. They want to give you an earful of whatever strategy they’ve got going in the neighborhood that day, and sometimes they’re going to make sure you hear it whether you want to or not! No one likes to be treated like that.

With that in mind, then, let’s think not so much about the apologetics aspects (*answering* non-Christians) of being “living epistles” but about just being with non-Christians and forming relationships. This is not about compromising the faith, or indulging distorted views, or being fascinated with non-Christian spirituality. It is to ensure that good relationships arise, whether brief or long-lasting, with those for whom we have answers. If we hope to bring non-Christians onboard, our apologetics and “friendship evangelization” must find their places within good relationships.

SUBMARINES AND WARSHIPS

Any number of good resources are available regarding relationships, so what follows here is by no means like the Law of the Medes and Persians, which cannot be changed. Here we will look at several time-

tested ideas and suggestions, drawn together from experience and Scripture specifically for this article, and use what I call the “Submarine Communications Model.”¹

Remember those old World War II movies about submarines and warships? A submarine typically might be floating on the surface of the ocean when suddenly enemy battleships appear on the horizon. A sudden sense of urgency strikes the men in the sub. They scurry to their posts, Klaxon horns blare ominously, and over the intercom the voice of the commander orders, “Dive! Dive!” The battleships meanwhile are steaming furiously toward the sub, intending to blast a few holes into its side.

Too often Christians look like those warships to non-Christian spiritual seekers, who cannot move fast enough to get out of our line of fire! We begin a conversation, the person starts listening, but then we do or say something, usually unwittingly, that sends the wrong signal to the person’s radar. It’s a common dynamic. We are perceived as dangerous, and the person dives below the surface of communication, effectively insulated from really hearing what we are saying. The person is no longer actively listening. If we continue to be menacing, he or she will mentally move leagues away, even though physically present.

With a little effort and experimentation, we can develop good relationships with non-Christians by learning how to keep them floating on the surface of communication. Instead of alarming their radar, we can cultivate their attitudes toward us and send the kind of signals that will keep them engaged in conversation. Instead of being perceived as “enemy battleships,” we will appear as inviting luxury cruise liners. In brief, we *can* change the way we “look.” Maybe then seekers will let us come up alongside them. Not only that, but maybe they will eventually come aboard our ship to go with us to our Destination. Isn’t that, after all, the goal? Let’s examine some common, but overlooked, ways in which we tend to sink “subs,” and how we may instead form good relationships with non-Christians, that they may one day enjoy that ultimate relationship with Jesus Christ.

“ALARMING SIGNALS” OR SAFE HAVENS?

Failing to Relate to People as Persons. Under certain circumstances, we can forget that people are people. This is probably at the heart of all failed relationships. People are not viewpoints or mere things, like computers or abstract entities. In other words, as human beings they are prone to human reactions. Non-Christian spiritual seekers probably have different backgrounds than ours, and they certainly have different beliefs. Because they bring a wide range of emotions to a relationship, they may easily misunderstand us or become frustrated, upset, or offended. There’s a lot to be said for the little phrase, “I’m sorry.” It does not hurt to say, “You know, I have the feeling I’ve just upset you. I didn’t mean to. I’m sorry about that”; or, “I think we’re misunderstanding each other. Do you feel that way too? What can we do about that?” Comments such as these also help others pour out their own feelings, which may be the first time they have ever felt free to do so with a Christian. If this occurs, let them, and try not to react negatively. Their barriers to believing the gospel may be falling.

On a radio station in Nottingham, England, I once debated a professional psychic who, unbeknown to me, had a deep animosity toward Christianity. Something was terribly wrong. About halfway through the program, my intuition told me to move in a direction other than trying to win arguments, so I gently asked her whether a Christian had ever hurt her. It was a risky question because we were live on the radio. There was dead air for several seconds — an eternity in radio time; finally, she described being hurt by a number of Christians. After we spent some time discussing these incidents, I said to her, “I want to apologize to you for those Christians who’ve treated you poorly. Please forgive us.” She did, and by then her whole demeanor had altered. Afterward, when we were out of the soundproof studio and in the outer offices, she confided, “Because I’ve been so hurt by Christians, I almost didn’t accept the offer to debate you. But now I’d like to ask if we could keep talking. Are you busy this afternoon?”

Issues of trust are also vital in relationships. If we want people to trust Christ as their Savior, are we making it difficult for them to trust us as Christ’s messengers? Why should they trust Christ for anything, if we promise to call them for lunch next week, or get them a copy of a book, or take them to church with us, but never follow up on it? Yet, it’s even more subtle than that. How will trust develop if we are

always attacking what gives meaning and significance to the person's life, that is, the person's beliefs? It's not that false beliefs should be ignored, but as the writer of Ecclesiastes said, there's a time and a place for everything. When we're thinking about forming relationships, that is a time — as Ecclesiastes further suggests — for building up, not for tearing down. Here's a warning: there may be some pride in our hearts if we resort to confrontation all the time. We may subtly be building ourselves up by tearing others down.

Sometimes we don't see anything of value in non-Christians as persons, which is so unlike Christ. We can become so fixated on their false beliefs or sins that we are blinded to what is of worth and value in others and in their lives. Sin and false belief aside, people are people. They have strengths and insights and normal ways of living, but if we're doing all the talking and not inquiring about them, it's an ugly form of disrespect that sinks "subs." It sends a signal that we don't have any interest in getting to know them. People feel recognized and respected when we affirm them, especially when we can say, "You've got a point there. That's right." It can be difficult, however, for some Christians to affirm that non-Christians could ever be right about anything! I remember once when I was speaking on homeopathy. During the feedback time, a holistic health care practitioner spoke in a way that clearly indicated to me that I was mistaken about a couple areas. If I had refused to be open to correction from her, I would not have had a fundamental respect for the truth, or for the relationship.

Identifying with a Caricature Instead of a Person. Our caricatures of non-Christians also prevent us from relating to them as persons. Effective communication and relationship building is not made from the stuff of political cartoons, flippant wisecracks, or stereotypes. The Rush Limbaugh radio program is a good example. Here is a man who seeks, big time, to influence people, but he rarely gets a hearing with a significant sector of America because to him they are "environmentalist wackos" or "feminazis."

Caricatures, which are often created by labels, are not only depersonalizing but also can become handy excuses for remaining intellectually lazy. Christians may say, "Oh, that's New Age," or, "She's a pagan," but they may be hardpressed to explain what they mean by that. Caricatures, too, are often about expectations, and we frequently base our behavior on our expectations. If we have expectations based on a caricature, we will probably be responding to a caricature rather than to a person. We may even be acting in Christian caricature ourselves, and that will certainly affect the behavior of the other person toward us in an adverse way.

Non-Christians, indeed, may be relating to *us* as a caricature, rather than as Christian people. Do we need to be reminded about how the culture identifies Christians as behind-the-times Bible thumpers, narrow-minded, unintelligent, superstitious, or with a host of other discrediting adjectives? There is a vague and negative perception of Christianity in Western culture today. It's a kind of bad rumor, a distortion, but it is all that most "outsiders" know about the faith, and as a result many people (who otherwise might like to know) haven't a clue about what is true Christianity with its love, its teachings, and its Savior. It's today's Nathaniel responding to Andrew's call to follow Jesus: "Christianity! Can any good thing come from it?"

In forming relationships, we must dispel others' caricatures of us while concurrently ensuring that we are free from caricatures of others. Relationships are not about caricature-to-caricature but person-to-person communication.

After a seminar I had conducted, a man in the audience spoke about his friend, an astrologer, whom he had tried to bring to the event. The friend would not attend any Christian meetings because he held grossly distorted views of what went on at them. "I know my friend would like to talk to you," he said. "What can I do to get him here tomorrow?" "Don't try," I said. "Ask him instead if we could talk by phone." The friend was up for that, and later in the week we had a good, long conversation on the phone.

Sounding Like the Demanding Boss, Rather than Having an Adult-to-Adult Conversation. It took me a long time to learn how to stop sinking "submarines" this way! The Christian who sounds like the demanding boss easily threatens most non-Christian spiritual seekers, who immediately dive below the surface of communication. The demanding-boss Christian is the judge, the dogmatist, the professor looking down his nose from behind the podium, thereby creating distance between himself and his

audience. There's certainly a time and a place for a lecture, but not, I think, in private conversations and budding relationships!

The demanding-boss Christian is full of "noes," "do nots," "must nots," and "ought nots." He or she lays down rules and laws and may be hypercritical, pointing the finger with a horrified look, saying, "That's wrong!" Or, "That's ridiculous." Or, "That's stupid." Or, "That's a bunch of nonsense." Of course, some things are wrong or foolish, but the early stages of relationships may not be the best time to go there. Once the relationship is solidly established, there will be time enough for such challenges.

On the lips of the demanding boss, there is no gracious speech seasoned with salt. The potential Christian would never know that the gospel is good news when the living epistle is pouring out so much bad news. Demanding-boss communicators often produce false, heartless submission on the part of their listeners. Such Christians walk away mollified, but no real fruit has been produced. The adult seeker, meanwhile, is being treated like a child. He's hearing: "Go cut the grass." "Clean up your room." "Get back to bed!" and he's thinking, *Look here, you can't tell me what to do! You're just like my father was!* People who have previously experienced demanding-boss Christians may be well submerged even at the start of any conversation with a Christian, and they will make certain to remain there with any Christian.

The way ahead is through adult-to-adult conversation. If someone is talking about her yoga classes, instead of expressing disapproval, ask why she became interested, what the classes are like, how much time is involved, what it costs, or how she benefits from them. By your asking questions, making comments, and *listening* to her replies, she won't feel threatened. She will remain floating solidly on the surface of communication. Think about how you talk to your spouse or a friend concerning your desire for them to join you at a theater or a restaurant. Think about how you would ask for a pay raise from your employer, or the way in which you would agree with a stranger on the price of a house.

Corking Our Ears Instead of Really Listening. Sometimes, let's admit it, we're not really listening. People sense that. All of us have been exasperated when, hoping to be understood, we realize that the other person is using his or her mind elsewhere in the universe rather than in the conversation. The person is aloof, thinking about taking the car in for repairs or wondering how to spend the next paycheck.

A subtle form of nonlistening poses as listening. It's "listening" in which the person already has his mind made up. He thinks he knows what he is going to hear, and instead of actively listening while someone is speaking, he is preparing his canned response. A real listener pays attention, listens actively, and remembers what is being said. "Let every one be quick to listen, slow to speak," wrote James (1:19; NASB).

Great benefits accrue to those who listen. For instance, some Christians think you have to be a well-read "expert" before you can talk to people about their beliefs. Not so. The Christian who is listening becomes discerning and asks for clarification when necessary; therefore, the Christian who listens is also learning. The other person, in turn, will know that you are not trying to score points, respond mechanically, or recite pet lines. She will know that you are trying to understand her.

Not long after getting her mind around a number of these ideas, a schoolteacher named Pam told me a remarkable story about the "captive audience" she had sitting next to her on a flight from San Francisco to Dallas. "She was a middle-aged woman," Pam told me, "and she was dressed a trifle funny — beaded and fringed, very long hair. Shortly after the seatbelt sign was turned off, she rummaged through the flight bag at her feet and spilled a bottle of incense. The pungent aroma went, and stayed, everywhere! She apologized to me about that and then brought out a New Age music tape and a Shirley MacLaine book. I was able to talk to her about her beliefs for the whole flight, even though I didn't know a thing about them. Before, I wouldn't have known what to say. The only hard part for me was biting back my words every time I wanted to demand that she clean up that foul-smelling incense!"

Some Christians get tripped up because they assume that to listen and to understand is to agree, and they don't want to be complicit with false beliefs; but understanding is not necessarily agreement. You do not

even have to like what you're hearing. The purpose is to understand the *person* so that at a later point, hopefully, the relationship will be such that Christ can be shared. Understanding is a prerequisite to persuasion, and listening is a great qualifier. In *Life Together*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, "One who cannot listen long and patiently will presently be talking beside the point and never really speaking to others, albeit he is not conscious of it."

We must be wise as serpents in all this. We don't live in an ideal world. Not everyone is sincere. After an evening meeting I led for a church in London, a meeting open to the general public, a woman deeply involved in *A Course in Miracles* struck up a conversation. Immediately she jumped into the deep end, asking me what I thought was wrong with it. At first, I didn't realize she was baiting me. I assumed she was interested in my views, but it soon became clear that this was a game to see how much she could rattle me in front of her entourage. Every time I began a thoughtful reply to one of her questions, she would immediately cut me off sharply and impose her views. Then she would pretend to be sorry for interrupting, ask another question, pretend to listen, and then immediately interrupt me again. It was sheer rudeness. I broke off the conversation as best I could and quickly found some people who really wanted to have a conversation.

OUT OF THE QUESTION

Another means for forming relationships, not to mention for drawing people out, is through the lost art of asking good questions. Watch skilled journalists interviewing politicians during a crisis. The journalists generally don't make straightforward statements or assertions about the politicians or the crisis. Their task is to engage the person (keep the person floating on the surface of communication), and in order to do that they ask good questions, often quite skillfully. Questions call for responses; they constrain the one being questioned to answer. Good questions draw the person into a conversation and topic, even if it's a difficult one, or a new one, for him or her.

Although often ignored, one of the most common approaches of God to people in Scripture is through the use of questions. In fact, God's first approach to Adam and Eve after the Fall was with questions, for questions can help people deal with painful choices. After Job's counselors burnt out their various formal theological statements, God burst on the scene with a flood of questions for Job, for questions can open people up to new and different possibilities. Our Lord, Jesus, used questions many times to lead seekers into the light, for questions can be revealing. While blasting away often generates more heat than light, questions can open people to the truth of life.

Asking appropriate questions of spiritual seekers (rather than just pounding out information) draws them into conversations. Even if you don't like me, if I ask you a series of questions — Why are you reading this article? Are you getting anything out of it? How will you apply it? — each question evokes a response from you because it requires you to think with me. From the question comes a communication bridge, and a relationship forms. Questions attract a person's attention and keep that person participating in the conversation. They help the other person feel that he or she is on equal footing with the speaker, and questions present the speaker as an interested listener. They help change subjects, should the conversation begin to flag or become too intense, and they free the speaker from sounding like the demanding boss or the lecturing parent. Furthermore, truths about God, the gospel, and Jesus Christ coming in the shape of questions rather than as preachy statements will seem far less threatening to non-Christians.

In talking with someone who, let us say, reveals her belief in reincarnation, remember that she's taking a risk by opening up to you on this point. She may even be a bit embarrassed about bringing it up. Instead of hammering her with Hebrews 9:27 or Job 14:12, a few sensitive questions will show respect, establish trust, draw her out, and give you a communication bridge for deeper sharing later on.

The idea, of course, is not to string together a litany of random questions. To begin, you could ask her where the belief comes from, or why she believes it, or if there's any proof for it, or how it affects her daily life. The idea is to have a simple goal in mind, toward which the questions will lead the person. Ask

one or two questions, and listen attentively to the replies. Make a comment or two, perhaps, and then ask other related questions. Answer any questions the person may ask as best you can. This give-and-take of ideas produces adult-to-adult conversation. The person is floating solidly on the surface of communication, during which you have some options. Your goal may be to end this particular conversation and return to it later. You may decide to change the subject. Or you may want to continue with the topic.

One of my goals through the use of questions is to lead seekers to what the Bible says about a topic and then simply leave them thinking about it. Let's say it seems appropriate to stay on the subject of reincarnation. Still, for spiritual seekers, I usually want to "smuggle in" the Bible's view rather than present it overtly, such as by sharing chapter and verse, because that may send a wrong signal and I'll lose them below the surface of communication. So I'll ask another question, such as, "Do you know that there are really only three views of life after death?" Most people have never thought about this, and it piques their interest. When they ask what I mean, I'll say something like, "You know the reincarnational view, so there's no need to go into that. But there's also the annihilationist view and Jesus' view." I'll explain the annihilationist view first, and then Jesus', or the resurrectional, view. When I share a biblical view, I just explain it. I don't try to force belief. I just leave the person with it. (The Holy Spirit is responsible for the outcome. We are just responsible to be faithful witnesses.)

What has happened to the seeker by the end of the process is actually quite profound. Through the use of good questions with a goal in mind, beginning with a seeker's particular belief, the person has been moved through adult-to-adult conversation into grappling with biblical truth. To a Christian who's well versed in the faith and who's been walking in it a long time, this may not seem like much of a goal; but for many, if not most, spiritual seekers, it's a major breakthrough. This may be the first time, or the first time in a long time, that the person has heard anything really biblical, or come across a Christian with whom a decent conversation is possible. The person has not been preached at and not become offended. He or she has been persuaded to think about biblical ideas, and a relationship with a Christian is forming that will bear fruit in season. Once in a while the person may now be ready to pray for forgiveness and receive Christ. If so, follow that up; but most often, at least in my experience, it's enough for the seeker, for the time being, to be left to think about "these strange things."

Also, try not to ask "binary" questions, the type of question in which "yes" or "no" is the only possible response. Those won't carry a conversation; they usually end it. There is, of course, a time for that sort of question, but not, I think, in the contexts we have been discussing here. Try asking "open-ended" questions — ones that stimulate the seeker to respond thoughtfully. These questions can create new windows of perspective for the person, such as the foregoing examples indicate.

FROM THE UNIMAGINABLE TO THE IMAGINABLE

With a little effort and experimenting, approaches to relationships such as these can help any Christian be a better living epistle, anytime and anywhere. Some Christians may wonder: What's the point? Why not just jump right in with the gospel? Isn't that what Jesus and Paul did? Yes. But Jesus and Paul also spent time preparing people *to believe*. According to Matthew 13:11–23, Jesus spoke of those who understand the message of the kingdom when they hear it. These people, he said, produce crops. Those people who hear it but who do not understand it have the seed of the Word snatched away by the evil one, for there is no ground and no basis for understanding. The effective Christian communicator must establish grounds for understanding because the gospel seems improbable, unthinkable, and unimaginable to non-Christian spiritual seekers. This is a major reason why they usually refuse to convert when they first hear the gospel. They have a worldview in which, simply put, the gospel just doesn't make sense. It seems foolish to them, as Paul would remind us (1 Cor. 1–2), so why should they believe it? A large part of our efforts as Christians, therefore, must be invested in the ground-breaking communication that helps the gospel appear probable, believable, and credible to non-Christians. When the gospel makes sense to them, the possibilities for entering a loving relationship with Christ increase.

Call it what you will. The task of moving non-Christians from the improbable to the probable, from the unimaginable to the imaginable, is a vital task of living epistles. It is about cultivating a certain frame of mind and attitude in our relationships — one that, ultimately, moves people ever closer to saving faith. There's an old proverb about the sun and the wind competing to make a man take his cloak off. The stronger the wind blows, the tighter the man pulls the cloak around himself. The sun, however, smiles ever more warmly and gets the job done.

-- by Charles Strohmer

NOTES

1. I develop this model more extensively in *The Gospel and the New Spirituality: Communicating the Truth in a World of Spiritual Seekers* (Thomas Nelson, 1996).