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WHY I TALK WITH NEW AGERS

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Editor's note: Dr. Gordon Lewis is professor of theology and philosophy at Denver Seminary and the founder of Evangelical Ministries to New Religions. As an instructor and author in the field of Christian missions to new religions, Dr. Lewis has sometimes been questioned about his practice of holding unpublicized dialogues with New Agers (as though in some way this implies a compromise of the faith). In the following article Dr. Lewis explains his policy in such matters, and in the process outlines several important principles and guidelines for approaching New Agers. Although the following is a departure from our usual Witnessing Tips style, it is very much in keeping with the purpose of this column: to further evangelism of those committed to unchristian belief systems.

I talk with people involved in new religions and cults when I can, although for over thirty years I have taught, preached, and written against their unbiblical teachings. My standard policy is to present and defend divinely revealed moral virtues and Christ's grace anywhere I am invited if my message is not curtailed. (As a young Bible school student I recall several fundamentalist leaders who declared that they would speak anywhere, including to modernist groups, so long as they were free to present the gospel.)

In October, 1987, I was invited without restrictions to converse with several local and national New Age leaders at Gold Lake, Colorado. My participation was sponsored neither by Evangelical Ministries to New Religions nor Denver Seminary. As a researcher I accepted the opportunity for firsthand information, and as a Christian I went having put on all the biblical "armor" (Eph. 6:10-18) and having prayed for discernment and opportunities to honor my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

My general objectives in talking with people in any group unreached by the gospel of God's grace are threefold:

1. In an increasingly polarized and violent world, I desire to promote understanding and just relationships among my "neighbors." Even though some people may be involved to some degree in New Age thought and practice, they are still image-bearers of God and so of inestimable worth. I respect their inherent rights and treat them as I would want them to treat me. Like foreign missionaries, we need contacts with the people we seek to reach. We need to learn from them in order to serve them as we live among them, Lord willing, for many years to come. Furthermore, just as God in common grace lets the rain fall on the unjust as well as the just, we must do good to all people (Gal. 6:10). Jesus explained that His disciples do good even to those who may oppose them.
2. In my calling as a minister and a teacher of apologetics and theology, I seek to put into practice the pre-evangelistic strategies I teach. When talking with adherents of alternative philosophies and religions I try to follow Paul's example in ministering to the first-century Athenians (Acts 17). Paul was the apostle to the Gentiles (pagans unacquainted with the covenant-making God of Israel and the Old Testament). At Athens, the university center of the ancient world, Paul: (a) commended the religious zeal of stoic pantheists and idol worshippers; (b) quoted Stoic poets favorably on matters of common ground; and (c) declared the dependence, obligation, and guilt of all before the universal Creator. Paul understood that those who come to God must believe that "He" (as a personal spirit distinct from the world) "is" (Heb. 11:6).

3. After pre-evangelistic objectives are reached, my ultimate goal in conversations with individuals and groups of people in new religions and cults is to do the work of an evangelist. At Athens Paul concluded with (d) a solid reason why all people should receive the redemption of Christ — God raised Him from the dead. Several leaders of the Greek city-state believed! Evangelism is the ultimate goal of Christian outreach. After seeking to remove roadblocks in the way of faith, I invite people to believe the gospel and trust Christ. If they do not immediately receive the Messiah, I hope that in God's providence they will have taken a step in that direction.

In approaching New Agers (and people in other philosophies and religions) I keep several additional factors in mind. I:

Differentiate a system of thought from its elements. Although Paul's theistic belief system was diametrically opposed to the Stoics' pantheistic system, he did acknowledge certain elements of truth in the Stoics' teaching (Acts 17:28).

Acknowledge both similarities and differences. When examining religious ideas there are two extreme perspectives. On the one hand some people like to see only similarities. They assume that all religions teach the same thing. On the other hand there are those who see only differences. They think there can be no elements of truth in religious movements other than their own. Fairness and objectivity require assessment of both similarities and differences.

Set apart ideas from the persons who hold them. Although for many years in class and in print I have opposed the teachings of pantheism and occultism, I seek to respect the rights of people influenced by misleading views and love them as Christ would. Concern for persons need not imply any compromise of doctrine. And a wise communication of Christian truth need not be uncaring.

Distinguish public debating from personal evangelism. The goal of winning persons to Christ from other world views often calls for a more private type of conversation rather than a desire to win points in a public debate. A desire to avoid the media's presence and undue publicity when witnessing to people in other religions hides nothing unethical. Hence a critic's comparison of unpublicized pre-evangelistic conversations with New Age people to the illegalities of the Watergate break-in is as irrelevant as it is unwarranted.

Contrast the Christ of New Age thought with the Jesus of evangelical Christianity. Although both New Agers and evangelical Christians speak highly of Jesus and of spiritual experiences with Christ, *interpretations* of Jesus Christ's nature differ radically. At the Gold Lake dialogues and in a letter to all participants, I pointed out that New Age people revere Jesus as a man who sought to become God (or attain the Christ spirit) whereas evangelicals worship Jesus as the eternal Word of God (John 1:1) who became a human (John 1:14), atoned for our sins, rose from the grave, and ascended back to the "right hand" of the heavenly Father, far above all angels, demons, and human spiritual masters (living or dead).

May all who follow the example of Paul rejoice when the eternal Word who became flesh is presented, even if there may be different approaches to communicating the good news of His incarnation, sacrifice, resurrection, and triumphant ascension (Phil. 1:18).

— Gordon R. Lewis