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3 PRINCIPLES IN NAVIGATING DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS

BY LARRY MOYER

Founder & CEO, EvanTell

Conversations about spiritual things that are pleasant and positive are a breeze. Any believer knows how to handle those. But what about those that are more difficult for any number of reasons – the demeanor of the person, objections that are raised, or a refusal to reason or listen?

I compare navigating difficult conversations about spiritual things to a captain navigating a ship through rough waters. The more skill and experience you have, the better.

Even now, I am still learning how to handle such conversations. But as I often tell people, the exciting thing about evangelism is that you are one person wiser with each person to whom you speak. There are three principles I have learned that may be extremely helpful in navigating difficult conversations.

LOOK BEYOND THE PERSON TO THE PROBLEM.

Remember that unbelievers talk and act as expected – as unbelievers. They are what Ephesians 2:1 calls “dead in trespasses and sins” and what I Corinthians 4:4 calls “spiritually blinded”. Unless the Holy Spirit works in their hearts and lives, they will never see their need or the thoughtlessness of what they are sometimes saying. Even if they rant and curse during your conversation, that behavior is to be expected of them. Remember that at one time, you were spiritually blinded as well.

Looking beyond the person to the problem causes you to sympathize with them in their lost condition. It is interesting that eight times in the New Testament we are told that Christ

had compassion toward the lost. Matthew 9:36 tells us, “But when He saw the multitudes, He was moved with compassion for them, because they were weary and scattered, like sheep having no shepherd.” It literally means He pitied them. He saw their condition, which impacted their conduct.

When you look beyond the person to the problem, it causes you to recognize who they are, not merely what they are saying or doing. It helps you see their need for your message of grace. It also reminds you, “There, but for the grace of God, go I!”

TALK TO GOD AS YOU ARE TALKING TO THEM.

In a difficult conversation there are more than two people present – there are three. The third person – Jesus Christ – is the most helpful of all. What adds to the excitement of the conversation is that He hears the whispers of the heart. I can speak to Him at the same time I am speaking to an unbeliever.

As you do, ask God for three things – direction, calmness, and wisdom. Remember He is more concerned about the person you’re speaking with than you are. So, rest assured that He will provide those three things and provide them in abundance.

One of my favorite verses on prayer has always been Hebrews 4:16. “Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need.” That “time of need” often varies, but sometimes it is when we are face-to-face with an unbeliever in a difficult conversation. In the quietness of my heart, I can say, “God help me. I need

CONTINUED INSIDE ➤

DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS

direction, I need to stay calm, and I need your wisdom with every word I speak.” Ask and you will receive.

AS THEIR TEMPERATURE RISES, LET YOURS DROP.

Truth can be very convicting to an unbeliever. I have seen one of the greatest battles take place in a person’s life just before they came to Christ. It has been said that sometimes before people get saved, they get mad. They see themselves for who they really are before God, and that is not always pleasant. The worst thing you can do is join them in their anger and reflect their frustration back at them. However, if your temperature drops as theirs rises, that can certainly be used by the Lord.

What two verses could be more to the point than II Timothy 2:24-25, where we are told, “And a servant of the Lord must not quarrel but be gentle to all, able to teach, patient, in humility correcting those who are in opposition, if God perhaps will grant them repentance, so that they may know the truth.” Note the word “gentle”. Proverbs 15:1 says the same thing in different words. “A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh a word stirs up anger.”

I once led two people to Christ who became increasingly disturbed as I spoke. I let my temperature fall as theirs began to rise. In the end they trusted Christ, and later they told me, “We couldn’t get over how calm you stayed. It dawned on us, if it is the truth, why does a person need to get angry about it?” They then told of their family members who only responded with anger each time they raised a religious question. By reminding me to allow my temperature to fall as theirs rose, God made an eternal difference in the lives of those two people.

That ability to remain calm when they are angry is not something that always comes naturally. But “God in you” can cause it to happen.

CONCLUSION

Navigating difficult conversations is not easy, but these three principles can make a huge difference. Remember that God has to bring people to Christ; we can only bring Christ to people. If we do our part, God will do His. Doing our part is walking in accordance with Scripture and letting His light shine into their darkness. As a captain steers a ship through rough waters, God can help us steer the person through the rough waters of unbelief to faith in Christ.

TESTIMONY: HOW A DIFFICULT CONVERSATION OPENED THE DOOR TO THE GOSPEL

Chuck Cummings is a CPA in Houston who loves to share his faith. One day, he was talking to a client of his, and the conversation lent itself to an opening for spiritual matters. He asked his client, “Are you interested in spiritual things?”

Suddenly, the man went into an angry rant of how mad he was at God because he asked Him to make his father stop beating his mother and siblings - and He never did it. Almost immediately, this had turned into a very difficult conversation. Chuck calmly looked at his client and asked him a very important question: “Do you think God was responsible for those beatings?” The man, startled at the question, replied, “Well, no.” Chuck paused for a moment and then asked, “So then why are you blaming God for this?”

The man couldn’t give him an answer.

Chuck took the opportunity of this stunned silence to pivot the conversation to the gospel. He asked, “Wouldn’t you like to know beyond any doubt that if you were to die today, you’ll go to heaven?” His client soberly confessed that he would. Chuck responded, “Well, suppose you were to stand before God and He were to ask why He should let you into heaven - what would you tell Him?” The man said, “I would tell Him I’ve lived a good life.”

Chuck then took the Bible, and using EvanTell’s Bad News/Good News approach, clearly explained the gospel to his client. To his relief and delight, the man trusted Christ right then and there! All of this happened within an hour.

Difficult conversations are by nature, well, difficult. But always remember that God can use them for His glory!

HOW THE APOSTLE PAUL NAVIGATED DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS

Much of Paul’s ministry was to go to the religious leaders in major cities, engage them in dialogue, and present the truths of the gospel. Each time he did so, he faced opposition and even ridicule.

Here are a few lessons we learn from his ministry:

Keep the main motive in mind — Paul’s primary desire was for people to come to know the Lord. He shares this motive in 2 Timothy 2:10: “Therefore, I endure all things for the sake of the elect, that they also may obtain salvation which is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory.” Paul kept this motive in mind, and it provided him with boldness, fortitude, even compassion.

Grow a thick skin — Paul was accused of several things during his ministry, including being a “babbler” (Acts 17:18) and talking like a madman. Paul did not let insults and accusations like these keep him from moving forward with sharing the gospel in love.

Be quick to apologize — In Acts 23, Paul addresses the religious leaders in Jerusalem who had captured him for preaching the gospel. The high priest Ananias ordered the guards to strike Paul. Paul retaliated by insulting Ananias. When Paul learned that Ananias was the high priest, he quickly recanted his disrespectful comment. When the Holy Spirit convicts us that we are in the wrong, no matter how we are being treated, we need to be quick to own what we did and give our apology.

Recognize that people respond differently — Acts 17:32-34a describes the scene after one of Paul’s sermons, “And when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked, while others said, “We will hear you again on this matter.” So, Paul departed from among them. However, some men joined him and believed.” Just because some may respond with hostility or indifference does not mean that those same people may not be open later or that others who hear will be closed. Do not let one closed door keep you from searching for open ones.

DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS: WHAT IF THEY DON’T BELIEVE GOD EXISTS?

Sharing Christ with those who claim there is no God is not always easy. But neither is it as difficult as we sometimes make it. Recognizing several fundamental principles will help.

1

Give them a chance to consider and explain their conclusions before talking. Then you can address their concerns more specifically.

2

Keep in mind that sometimes when people say there is no God, they are not saying it based on research. They are doing it based on rebellion. Some say there is no God because they prefer to live as though God does not exist, not because they are convinced He doesn’t.

3

Other times, people may have been hurt by circumstances in life. They think that if there is a God who would allow this, He can’t be a good God, so they prefer to conclude there is no God.

4

Ask them to examine historically the cross and the resurrection—the two things on which Christianity stands or falls.

6

Pray for them. As with all non-Christians, if they are going to come to Christ, God has to bring them (*see John 6:44*).

5

Let truth rather than emotion guide you.

7

Remember, on their own, people cannot see the light of the gospel and come to Him. We may be the instruments God uses, but it takes His power through the convicting work of the Holy Spirit to bring them to Christ (*see John 16:8–11*).

(Adapted from *The Evangelism Study Bible*)