

20th March 22: Enquire, Don't Disagree!

Well good morning everyone and welcome to Week 2 of Everyday Spiritual Conversations¹. If you missed last week we're taking a short interlude of our exposition of Luke to engage in this series for equipping and encouraging us in our conversational evangelism.

Just to briefly re-cap from last week: our theme was "Ask, don't tell"

We talked about the fear, and expectations that come from even just the mention of the word evangelism, our heart rate increasing and our vocal chords constricting at the very thought of speaking about Jesus. Whereas, when we know the Lord Jesus, when we have experienced his grace and hope for ourselves, when we know God's heart is for the lost, why would we not want to pass this on?!

I gave you a number of important stats, the key one being around 40% NZers would claim to be Christian, meaning conservatively, around 3m people do not know the Lord Jesus! We are the feet of good news...

But I also shared one of a number of conversation killers with you: *Unbelief*. And that our sharing with others relies on us believing that God's heart is for the lost and that the Holy Spirit can open doors of opportunity every day for conversation – when we are willing and available - and the key to great conversations is? ...Great questions!

A few years ago I watched a Billy Graham documentary on Netflix...

Here are two images from his ministry (pic crusade New York 1957) (pic crusade LA 1949)

Now I realise in this series we're talking about conversation, dialogue, not preaching – although there is certainly a place for that. I mention this because I want us to be inspired by what can happen when the God the Holy Spirit moves and we are obedient to that move and what can happen when the gospel – the power of God unto salvation - is spoken. I was really moved by these images.

But you know what was more impactful for me, when his family, friends, even US presidents were able to say he's the same person, with the same simple message...1 million or 1 person. He loved Jesus and wanted anyone to know the same.

He was confident and articulate, but said it wasn't him who moved people toward Christ. "Prayer is crucial to evangelism," he said. "No matter how logical our arguments or how fervent our appeals, our words will accomplish nothing unless God's Spirit prepares the way." Prayer, obedience, and reliance on the Holy Spirit all sit in behind our need to grow in the *priority* of evangelism.

With that in mind, let's get into today's theme: **"Enquire, don't disagree"** ...

How is that even possible when what a person might be saying to us or asking us about, is something that is totally inconsistent with scriptural truth, is something I don't believe in, and is opposed to my values. *Conversation*. Its why we need prayer, and it's where we need God's wisdom, God's grace, God's love and, God's Spirit preparing the way to help us. Another word I might throw in here would be *restraint*. Quick to exercise God's wisdom, slow to blurt out the first thing that might come into our heads.

¹ Adapted from resources provided by Hope Project

Because “careless words can erode our credibility”² and add to what in many cases is already a dim view of Christianity. Firstly, bear in mind that 2 out of 3 people will not believe what you believe. 2ndly, they will have - because of the pervasive influence of media and internet - have wide and varied perceptions about Christians. Recall the scripture from last week? “...*the god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers*” (2 Cor. 4)

You and I cannot control what other people - even Christians – say or their conduct. But we can control our words. A very important key to effective spiritual conversation is to exercise wisdom, is to choose our words carefully, remembering that what we’re confronting is *the blinded minds of unbelievers*.

Folks, the gospel you share - the power of God is in it - can turn around that blindness. Do you believe that?!

When we are looking for an opportunity to converse with ‘not-yet-Christian’ people, we are talking to people whose minds are blinded, *for now*. Unwise, unrestrained, and not-in-the-Spirit disagreement is in my view an ineffective way of leading people to Christ. We are not trying to win a philosophical argument, our task - NB: in the Spirit - is to see them reconnected (yes!) with God

I wonder if at times Christians are perceived in our communities as the “disagreement people”? Whilst there are moral and ethical matters we disagree with as they are opposed to God and his word, we again must remember the people we are conversing with believe and think differently, for now. But the message we send is, ‘we don’t agree with you, and therefore we don’t accept you’. We can say we want to love the sinner but hate the sin but my experience is the two aren’t that distinguished to the not-yet-Christian, because the words we’ve used, our tone and our posture have given a certain message.

So even in disagreement, how do we love others with the gospel?

Doug Pollock says “Acceptance does not mean endorsement. When we confuse the two, we destroy the very space God wants to work in”³. Jesus himself used language familiar to the day and adopted a posture that built bridges and opened doors. I would suggest we learn to do the same.

If we are to engage people in conversation, it won’t be long before people are saying things we disagree with – and this is certainly so when it comes to the big questions of life. Questions of life after death. Moral/ethical questions. If God is a God of love why is there...?

We believe that God has revealed himself, and that specific answers to life’s big questions are therefore possible, not least in the person of Jesus. However, we live in a society that has embraced the view that absolute truth can’t be found – or probably doesn’t even exist.

So how do we turn these potential disagreements into conversational opportunities?

Imagine you are listening – *remember listening from last week?* - to a vocal quartet, but one person is singing a little out of tune. While you can’t place it, you can hear a ‘*sour note*’.

² Godspace, 26

³ Godspace, 31

The same thing happens in conversations. People say things that don't make sense to us personally. The 'sour notes' are our opportunities to ask questions and respond in wisdom. Here's 2-3 suggestions of questions or phrases you might use at such times:

- "So, if I'm hearing you right, this is what you're saying. Is this what you believe?"
- You're saying you feel this way about this certain thing (*you reflect back*) because (*reflect back*) is this right?"
- "So the thing that's most important to you is (*reflect back*) ...?"⁴

Such questions, phrases and good listening skills validate the hearer, help them feel heard and valued, create space for God to work in, or rather we're then working in the space God is in!

A personal example: I mentioned last week a friend and I would regularly go into the city and have spiritual conversations with people. I recall one conversation where a gentleman wanted to tell us all about certain 'spirits' he interacted with – *can I pause there*. I think an important value to take into conversation is being ready for anything that people might say.

When we have engaged a conversation we invite their response whatever it might be and we are unshockable⁵. And this is why prayer and being in the Spirit are important too!

Now perhaps the typical response might be to say with concern, "Mate, why on earth do you think that way. That's so wrong! There is absolutely no such thing!" But remember society's view is that everyone has their own truth, right? That's what we're working with!

My go-to response with such situations is: "thanks so much. I really appreciate you sharing that with me. Perhaps we have something in common. We're both spiritual people. Could you tell me a little more about what you believe to help me understand"?

So I'm not agreeing or disagreeing. I am validating that his beliefs are his beliefs but showing an interest in what he has to say. The principle here is: affirming the good, accepting, not necessarily endorsing, while asking a question about what I don't understand

This all led to a conversation in which I was able to explain very gently the confusion created by lots of truths and people having their own truths when there is only one truth basis, the person of Jesus and that the gospels are a factual and historical record of his life, death and resurrection.

NOTES:

- Small talk established trust
- Spiritual things came into *natural* conversation – matter of just being yourself)
- Where there was disagreement I held my opinion, and it led to an open two-way conversation that progressed naturally (*asking questions*) onto meaningful matters.

Let's have a look at Jesus to see how he engaged in conflict through passages of scripture:

Luke 5.33-35

They said to him, "John's disciples often fast and pray, and so do the disciples of the Pharisees, but yours go on eating and drinking." Jesus answered, "Can you make the friends of the bridegroom fast while he is with them? But the time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them; in those days they will fast."

⁴ Adapted from Godspace, 60

⁵ That includes our posture, body language and the words we use. We are to remain calm and restrained and in the Spirit with our response. Even when a person may share something we would consider morally reprehensible.

The conflict: Jesus breaking cultural/religious norms regarding fasting

Jesus' response: Jesus uses a question to invite their engagement in a conversation. Jesus does so while also giving an illustration that might help his reasoning to make sense.

Luke 14:1-7

One Sabbath, when Jesus went to eat in the house of a prominent Pharisee, he was being carefully watched. There in front of him was a man suffering from abnormal swelling of his body. Jesus asked the Pharisees and experts in the law, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath or not?" But they remained silent. So taking hold of the man, he healed him and sent him on his way. Then he asked them, "If one of you has a child or an ox that falls into a well on the Sabbath day, will you not immediately pull it out?" And they had nothing to say. When he noticed how the guests picked the places of honour at the table, he told them this parable: ...

The conflict: Whether Jesus can heal a sick man on the Sabbath

Jesus' response: yet again – he asks a question. Only in the face of their silence does he heal the man. Then (in v5) he gives them an illustration that could help

Whilst we don't have every word Jesus spoke we have accurate *summaries* of his encounters and conversations. And, what did the writers of the Gospels record as having been on Jesus' lips at the start of each incident? Questions!

And then – to make things clear, what did he do? He told a story or gave an illustration. So what we say, how we say it, and when we say it is vitally important in spiritual conversation. Remember, none of us clocks off, there's never a moment where we are not ambassadors of Jesus. We are to be ready in all seasons at all times. Which leads us into our 4th principle, see if you can pick it up from these verses that have lot to say about our speaking.

Prov. 29:11. *Fools vent their anger, but the wise quietly hold it back.*

James 1:5. *If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you.*

James 3:17f. *But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness.*

Prov. 13:3. *Those who guard their lips preserve their lives, but those who speak rashly will come to ruin.*

However, if we are going to become more effective as witnesses, we need to learn to **exercise wisdom** (that's the 4th principle this morning) and quite possibly restraint in some of the things we might normally say in some circumstances and learn how to engage people in non-threatening two-way SPIRITUAL conversations.

And doing so is really about people skills – and it can be learnt! Whenever there is disagreement / whenever you hear one of those 'sour notes', applaud what is good while asking a question about what you 'don't understand'.

Here's a short helpful video clip to reinforce what we're talking about

here...https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v_uruMQCWsl&index=3&list=PLdMIObPABEHkiunBbs5lauFQwNTXmYT-C (1.46min – 3.41)

What do you mean by that? Where'd you get that idea from? Have you considered...? Etc. By speaking in questions and stories, you can engage people in conversations *that would probably not have happened otherwise*. By holding your tongue – you disagree without ever really saying you disagree...and by engaging the conversation, you might just discover more of who they are, of where they've been, and of what is going on in their heart.

Bible says in Col. 4:5-6. *Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.*

And because you've been gentle and encouraging and respectful...in the Spirit – another conversation follows – and then another – and you find yourself encouraging them along a journey toward faith in Jesus, one step at a time!

I want to signal to you now that we'll be talking in week 4 about what a summary of the gospel message is that will help us as we're faced with these types of opportunities.

Jesus modeled an approach that engaged every-day people in every-day conversations *that ended up touching the heart*. *If God's heart is for the lost, ours ought to be also*. Let's look out for and be ready for the opportunities with people – and do the same!

TAKEAWAYS

- Be ready for anything!
- Affirm the good
- Ask a question about what you don't understand
- Exercise wisdom

Prayer: Lord, would you help us to have courage to engage people in conversation. Wisdom in how we talk with people. And reliance on you as we do. We trust you Lord to open doors of opportunity for us, lead us by your Spirit as we seek to see people reconnected with you. Lord may the gospel be alive in our hearts extending the same grace to others that you have given us...

Next week – Conversation not confrontation