

From the April 4, 2008, Issue

## ***The Art of Spiritual Conversation Part 1***

Comfortable chairs. Munchies. Social lubricant (beer). And lots of unhurried time. The ingredients for *gooooood* conversation. Not just regular conversation (“Hi-how-are-you-I’m-fine-how-bout-that-local-sports-team”), but the kind of conversation that starts casually enough but then, upon receiving an unexpected blessing from the conversation fairy, becomes extraordinary.

You know the magic I’m talking about. All by itself, the conversation just starts to groove of its own accord. Everyone present talks deeply about anything and everything, especially the things that matter most. The sharing becomes easy, as if we humans were made for this sort of thing. Eventually the social lubricant gives way to chemical stimulant (coffee), and before you know it, it’s 4am and you’ve been talking all night and you still don’t want to stop, because you know this magic doesn’t happen everyday.

What’s happening in these conversations? Simple: Trinity.

In theological terms, Father and Son know one another (and all things) in the fellowship of the Spirit. In more down-to-earth terms, the life of God is an eternal 4am rap session. An unbounded Conversation that has always been and will always be. The gospel is that through the incarnate Christ, the human race has been included in that conversation. Whenever we engage in knowing one another (or knowing anything, for that matter) we are sharing in the Father-Son-Spirit conversation.

Now let’s look at evangelism in this light.

It’s [theoretically] easy to befriend non-believers and to do friend-things together. But things get awkward when we start to feel like we should be ‘witnessing’ to our friend. Why, for many of us, does ‘the talking part’ of evangelism feel weird?

It feels weird because we have it in our heads that non-believers are *not* already part of the conversation. I, the evangelist, am in contact with God. My target non-believer is not. If the non-believer wants to get in on the conversation, there are certain hoops he must jump through. And my job is to show him the hoops and somehow talk him into jumping.

Right? No wonder it’s awkward! But everything changes when you realize that Christ has already drawn us all into his life with his Father in the Spirit. Whether you believe in Jesus or not, you live and move and have your being in God. Likewise all your conversing (whether you know it or not) lives and moves and has *its* being in God’s conversation. Your talking with your non-Christian friend is possible only because God is *already* talking with *both* of you.

What does this understanding do for us evangelists? It removes the burden of salesmanship. Because salvation truly is free. Grace really is grace. There are no hoops to jump through. There is no method for entering the Triune conversation. Non-believers are already in it, whether they are aware of it or not. There is no product to sell. There is only conversation to be had, conversation to be deepened.

My job with my non-Christian friends? To participate in Jesus’ already-in-progress conversation

with them, and to learn along with them to taste and see the goodness of God and the life he's given us. How do we do that? Paul gave the Colossians this advice: "*The goal is to bring out the best in others in a conversation, not put them down, not cut them out*" (Col 4.6).

So really, the rules are no different from the rules for 'normal' conversation:

Listen more than you speak.

Be interested in the other person.

Say 'Wow,' and mean it.

Be honest. Agreement and disagreement are natural.

Seek first to understand, then to be understood.

Ask good questions.

Don't be afraid to disagree.

Admit when you're wrong.

When you don't know, say "I don't know."

Don't try to 'win.'

Why does 'the talking part' of evangelism feel weird? Because we think it's a different kind of a talking, with a different set of rules. Why do we think it's different? Because we believe untruths about God and about our friends. Our problem, as usual, is the problem of unbelief. But never fear: Our Teacher is none other than the Spirit of God himself, and he's good at what he does.

~ *John Stonecypher*