

CONVERSATION THAT TRUMPS CONFRONTATION

Ted Schroder, July 18, 2010

I have been reading a book entitled, *Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When Stakes are High*. The authors' definition of what qualifies a conversation as crucial is: "a discussion between two or more people where stakes are high, opinions vary, and emotions run strong." The authors teach a range of specific conversational skills, including skills for staying focused in the conversation, for making conversation *safe*, for listening with empathy, and for speaking persuasively, not abrasively. They suggest asking yourself four questions as you begin a crucial conversation: What do I really want for myself? What do I really want for others? What do I really want for the relationship? How would I behave if I really wanted these results?

I think this is what Paul was counseling Timothy to do in 2 Timothy 2:14-26. He warned him "against quarreling about words; it is of no value, and only ruins those who listen...Don't have anything to do with foolish and stupid arguments, because you know they produce quarrels. And the Lord's servant must not quarrel; instead he must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful."

Apparently there were people in the church who were argumentative, who indulged in godless chatter – empty words, pious talk – that was not backed up by the quality of their behavior. He names two as examples: Hymenaeus and Philetus, who had wandered away from the word of truth, and were destructive of the faith of some who were easily influenced in the church.

Paul uses the analogy of a kitchen in which there are fine gold and silver cups for use, and also wood and clay containers; "waste cans and compost buckets – some containers used to serve fine meals, others to take out the garbage. Become the kind of container God can use to present any and every kind of gift to his guests for their blessing." (*The Message*)

There are people who take the high road and those whose minds live in the gutter, even in the church! There are those who correctly handle the word of truth and those who don't. But the way to deal with those whose teaching spreads like gangrene is not to descend to their level, but to stand firm, pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace, out of a pure heart, and trust that the Lord knows those who are his. Gentle instruction and faithful conversation may result in them coming to their senses, and being released from the devil's trap.

Paul is advocating avoidance of confrontation and quarreling with antagonists. Instead he urges kindness and gentleness. Mutual respect and genuine concern may achieve much more than condemnation and demonization. Conversation may be more effective in establishing trust than argumentation.

Many of our greatest Christian leaders were known in their lifetime as engaging conversationalists. Samuel Johnson reflected, "I hate to meet John Wesley; the dog enchants you with his conversation, and then breaks away to go and visit some old woman." John Wesley's *Journal* reports an extensive ministry of conversation, including letter writing. Wesley coached his people to visit in homes and other places. He taught that conversation permits us to discern what gospel themes people are most open to, and it is the way to "get within" people and to "suit all our discourse to their several conditions and tempers." He concluded that conversation is necessary to reach most people. "For, after all our preaching, many of our people are almost as ignorant as if they had never heard the gospel...I have found by experience that one of these has learned more from one hour's close discourse, than from ten years' public preaching." (George G. Hunter III, *The Apostolic Congregation*, 87)

The value of conversation is that it promotes dialogue. People are free to ask questions about subjects, or issues, or doubts that have impeded their search or have resulted in misunderstanding. Simply being able to verbalize the problem aids in addressing it. Open discussion enables us to explore areas of belief and ignorance so that we learn more from one another. Listening to someone validates them, so that they feel that their concerns are taken seriously. The very fact that someone is taking time to listen and respond affirms them.

We do not have to have all the answers. Some questions cannot be answered satisfactorily. People appreciate candor. Most people have never had the opportunity to be in conversation with someone who cared, wanted to understand, and wasn't defensive or judgmental in the face of doubt or questions. George Hunter comments: "What makes the most difference is *the sacramental power of the ministry of conversation.*" (Op.cit.88)

He cites the example of Quest Community Church, Lexington, Kentucky. The church was conceived in conversations at a restaurant. The favored mode of Christian witness is faithful conversation. The form of the evangelistic invitation at the conclusion of worship is to come forward and get into conversation with someone who will help the person, who is now seeking to process the Christian possibility for his or her life. The seeker's conversation partner will dialogue as long as necessary.

All of Quest's leaders and members are committed, trained and available for this ministry. They discovered that the conversations are more often about life, and how to live one's life, than about doctrine or ideology. Most problems people have stem from their personal history rather than from intellectual doubts. The single most important thing they do in these conversations is to ask questions and then listen. They have learned that it is important to take enough time to earn the right to be heard. This requires not being judgmental toward the other person, and may involve appropriate honest self-disclosure of our own struggles.

They have learned to listen for feelings as well as meanings, and then to rephrase what they are hearing ('active listening') so that their conversation partners sense and feel that they are understood and that someone empathizes with them. People are grateful when you give them time to talk. Lengthy conversations should not be regarded as inconvenient but opportunities for the Spirit to lead. Peter Hise, the founding pastor, believes that to reach people today, a church "must create a culture of authentic conversation." (Hunter, 90)

"Create a culture of authentic conversation." How do you go about that in the church, in your interactions with others, in your family? Listen. Be present to others. Affirm. Support. Be genuinely interested. In other words: be patient, be kind, be loving. Give people the time of day. Don't be in a hurry. In a world of impersonal texting, emails, and tweeting where people are glued to their cell phones, and ipads, we need one another more and more. Remember what Paul advises Timothy: "God's servant must not be argumentative, but a gentle listener and a teacher who keeps cool, working firmly, but patiently with those who refuse to obey. You never know how or when God might sober them up with a change of heart and a turning to the truth, enabling them to escape the Devil's trap, where they are caught and held captive, forced to run his errands." (2 Timothy 2:24-26, *The Message*) You never know how God will use you to bless someone else.

St. Paul tells us to concentrate on our relationship to the Lord Jesus if we wish to help others come to know the word of truth. Pray for guidance. Listen to the Spirit. The Lord knows those who belong to him. We are called to be his instruments for noble purposes, useful to the Master and prepared for any good work. When we need help we are to call on the Lord with a sincere heart. We are meant to serve the Lord, and not pursue our own agenda.

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