Bridging to Common Ground: Communicating Christ Across the Cultural Divide

Have you ever felt like an alien in your own culture? What was your reaction to the people in that other group? The other day, mine was negative, then a bit hopeful. It all left me very humbled, but ready once more to build bridges and sow spiritual seed over shared common ground.

Always Ready?

There I was, in a vegetarian restaurant, talking to the Chinese owner about my motivations for patronizing this rare refuge for vegans, vegetarians and other people far removed from my day-to-day world. I just like to eat healthier sometimes, I weakly offered. After all, when I recently found it closed, I had sauntered to the Texas-style barbeque joint in the same shopping center feeling little irony.

Not so for most of the old man's clientele. They just seemed to fit the veggie-eaters mold. I felt conspicuously out of place as I mingled in the buffet line with pony-tailed guys, gals with their hair in doo-rags, Indian and Chinese immigrants. Yet there I stood, representing white middle-America in my Tommy Bahama knock-off shirt and dress slacks.

I spied a rack of religious booklets promoting an off-beat Asian religious group. Hey, I thought to myself, if you want authentic tofu-based cuisine, you have to mix with the diversity. No problem.

But I wasn't prepared for the group of youths who walked in next, sporting dreadlocks, torn Goth stockings, studded leather boots and T-shirts that would offend the most tough-minded. The "F" word assaulted me in a slogan scrawled across

the back of several wearing the official T-shirt for the punk band P*ssChrist.

I have to admit, I wavered between repulsion and compassion, amusement and offense. Then I began to fantasize about striding right up the large table of vegan-gothic-anti-social kids and introducing myself. I imagined chatting, asking about the band their shirts represent, then moving on to the fact that not all Christ-followers are hypocritical haters—see, I'm talking to you!

My two-fold goal in my little daydream, admittedly: to challenge their perception of an establishment-looking right-wing Christian guy like me and to test their own assumed sensibilities regarding acceptance, tolerance and diversity. After all, I judged, can they themselves show tolerance for a fellow who represents a polar opposite worldview and set of values? Or will they be found out as just another brand of bigot? All of this I dreamed up perhaps without even finding out their names! I never went over to their table.

Bad Thinking Means No Bridging or Burned Bridges

Upon reflection, I saw how off-guard I was spiritually and how deeply my gut reactions represent some questionable thinking, even unbiblical attitudes. I would probably have come off as, well, a hypocritical hater, despite the better intentions I mixed in with my prejudices. That drove me to prayer and back to a book that is still worth reading: *Finding Common Ground: How to Communicate with Those Outside the Christian Community—While We Still Can* by Tim Downs.

My response revealed several unhelpful presuppositions about people on the other side of the cultural divide and how to deal with them that still have roots in my soul, although I should know better. My private syllogism went like this:

> *They're obviously not for us (biblical believers), but against us, so*
>
> *The best way to deal with such people would be to confront them or ignore them (and I don't prefer the latter).*
>
> *Although confronting them outright would be wrong, it wouldn't take long for the tolerant approach to necessarily give way to an uncomfortable, confrontational proclamation of truth, so bring it on!*
>
> *Somebody's got to reach these folks, and it's apparent that sooner is better. These are the last days, after all.{1}*

But building bridges with the eventual goal of sharing the gospel fruitfully—something I've worked at full-time for two decades—requires much more. More thought, compassion, understanding, wisdom and patience. The kind, writes Downs, modeled not by grain harvesters, but rather by fruit growers. This is biblical, but often ignored by Bible-believers.{2}

As a member of an out-of-balance evangelical Christian subculture, I have unconsciously bought into a worldview that overvalues the spiritual harvest at the expense of spiritual sowing. In so doing, I am implicated in a scorched-earth mentality that neither tends the spiritually unready nor makes allowance for future crops.{3} I repent, and not for the first time.

This way of thinking assumes a vast conspiracy of God-haters. Although the caustic, outspoken atheism of Sam Harris and Richard Dawkins has risen to prominence recently, it is not the norm. Rather a muddled middle of persuadable unbelievers and confused born-agains is still a large part of the American scene.{4} The us vs. them approach tends to be self-fulfilling, writes Downs. If approached as an enemy, defensiveness is understandably generated in those who dont fit cleanly into our community. Even for announced enemies,

like the T-shirt-wearing punk rockers, turning the other cheek while engaging with love can be a powerful witness.

Another evangelical myth, according to Downs, is the *certainty* that we're experiencing the final harvest.{5} Indeed, the coarsening of the culture is a mainstay and we are promised that, in the End Times, things will go from bad to worse. That's sure how it looks, increasingly. Also, we conservative Christians, who shared the heady age of the Moral Majority, are now being blended with every other social group into a stew of diversity where no group is a majority—and we sound like jilted lovers, says Downs. We need to ask, How much of the spiritual fruit*less*ness in America might we be contributing to by our own perceptions and resultant attitudes?

To act out of such worldview-level angst and fail to prepare to reach future generations is dereliction. Picking low-hanging fruit, if you will, and plowing under the remaining vines is neither loving nor wise. It's certainly not God's way, thankfully.

If I'd waltzed up to that table of vegetarian punkers the other day, I'd have likely displayed the attitude Downs critiques and confesses having owned: I'll proclaim the truth. What they do with it is their business. In other words, 'Id walk away self-justified, ineffective—and likely having done harm rather than God's purposes. My commitment to justice would have overridden my practice of love.{6}

To make any genuine impact for Christ among a crowd so foreign to me as these youths would require more than mere personal chutzpah and a bag of evangelistic and apologetic "tricks." I'd need to wade humbly into their world, eyes wide open and skin toughened, expecting no respect (initially at least), hoping realistically only for long-term results. I could not be effective in my current state—from dress to time commitments to my mindset. To be missional about it long-term,

I'd need to be surely called of God and make a monumental life-change, like a missionary I met here in town.

Becoming All Things to All People

I first heard of Dale{7} when he spoke to parents at our kids' Christian school. I marvelled that he and his wife—both in their 40s—along with their three girls would pack up their middle-class home, leave a thriving youth pastorate in a Baptist church and take up residence in the grungiest, hippest part of Dallas, Texas. When I met with Dale down in Deep Ellum, I could feel the gaping divide between my suburban existence and the urban alternative, Bohemian art-music district scene he'd adopted.

When a couple of 20-something chicks interrupted our meal, I was annoyed that he left me hanging for some time. But Dale's apology stopped me short in my own self-absorption. He and his wife had befriended one of the gals, a bartender, and were seeking to slowly, carefully build a relationship with her without scaring her off. And it was working. She had noticed the non-confrontational yet uncompromising difference in this loving Christian couple and asked about it. Now, when she introduces these Christian friends, she openly initiates conversations about spiritual things with rank unbelievers. There's no threat felt, but plenty of curiosity.

The Apostle Paul wrote, "I have become all things to all men, so that I may by all means save some."{8} To use the hackneyed phrase, "Walk a mile in their shoes"—even if the shoes are foul (some punkers don't do hygiene) or not your style.

When I researched the band with the sacriligious name on the T-shirts, I was introduced to a subculture that not only was foreign to me, but one that actively alienates itself from the larger culture. Part of a movement called *anarcho-crust punk*, this particular band is known for blasphemous rants. Counter-cultural lifestyle, vile language, themes of death, filth and

anti-religious, anti-conservative and anti-capitalist identity politics all mark this underworld of dark lostness.

To bridge across cultural canyons—even such a radical one—to begin on common ground with those outside the Christian community, we need to:

> *adopt a bridging mentality—think of outreach as a process and pass your perspective on*
>
> *avoid fueling intolerant stereotypes and show genuine, biblical tolerance*
>
> *don't burn bridges—avoid unnecessary confrontation but rather persuade by modeling uncompromising love and concern along with truth*
>
> *remember from where you fell and recall who the Enemy really is—our struggle is not against flesh and blood{9}*
>
> *cultivate, sow, harvest and begin again. Patiently use art and subtle, effective communications{10}*
>
> *relate genuinely: share your own foibles, ask sincerely about their anger and pain*
>
> *wait on God's timing, but don't fail to offer the gospel and help them grasp faith*

For those called to go native to bridge across cultural divides, one couple reaching out in the London music-arts district serves as a model. In a four-hour conversation with a Londoner deep into the local scene—a definite unbeliever who knew of the couple's Christian commitments—the husband was asked:

> *What do you think of homosexuality?*
>
> *After thoughtfully pausing, he deferred, Well, I'd prefer to not share that with you.*

> *Why not?*
>
> *Because I believe my view on that will offend you and I don't want to do that; you're my friend.{11}*

Compromise? Wimpiness? No. Curiosity caused the non-Christian to ask again some time later, to which the believer responded gently, "As I said, I don't want to offend you, but since you asked again. . ." His reply led to Jesus Christ Himself. His biblical response evoked a thoughtful, "Oh—now I'm glad you warned me. That is very different from my opinion." The message was heard and respected. The relationship, still intact, grew in breadth and depth and led to a fuller witness.

Our London-based missionary took care, as a vinedresser, not to bruise the unripe fruit. His eventual impact with the life-changing good news of Christ was made possible by the patience and love he balanced with the hard truth. He and his wife, an accomplished musician, now have high-level contacts in this London subculture.

I'm taking mental notes and rereading Down's important book for some really useful and specific strategies for bridging to common ground with those alien to me.

Notes

1. *Finding Common Ground: How to Communicate with Those Outside the Christian Community…While We Still Can*, Tim Downs, (Moody Press: Chicago, 1999), Chapter 3, "Calling Down Fire," pages 33ff.
2. Ibid, 46.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid, 44.
5. Ibid, 47. See also: End Time Anxieties.
6. Ibid, 38.
7. Not his real name.
8. I Corinthians 9:22 (NASB).

9. Ephesians 6:12 (NASB).
10. Downs, T., op. cit., 66-71.
11. Based on second-hand account without attempt to check details of the conversation. The meaning was clear: by waiting and building credibility, the door to sharing more opened where none likely would have otherwise.

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