

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-again 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 don't 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 fruitlessness 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.

© 2007 Probe Ministries

Civil Discourse? – Radio version

Conservative Bridgebuilder

Think about the last time you channel-surfed the television news talk shows. Chances are, you encountered at least a few talking heads yelling at each other. Often, controversy reigns. Politics, religion, sex, or sports can ignite passion that can spill into incivility—on radio and TV, in workplaces, universities, neighborhoods, and families.

Are you exhausted or disgusted with debates and discussions that become food fights? This article considers some inspiring stories of risk-takers who build bridges of understanding across philosophical, political, and religious lines. They're helping put the "civil" back into "civil discourse" and have good lessons for us all.

First up is conservative commentator Cal Thomas. As vice president of Jerry Falwell's "Moral Majority," Thomas saw his share of partisan political debate. But he tells a humorous story about civility.[\[1\]](#)

The Moral Majority often mentioned Senator Ted Kennedy in its fund appeals. The senator and his liberal friends often mentioned Falwell in their own letters, each side alerting their constituents to concerns about the other.

Once, by mistake, Falwell's group sent Kennedy a "Moral Majority membership card." When *The Washington Post* asked Thomas if his organization would request the card back, Cal replied, "No, we don't believe any man is beyond redemption. In fact, we'd like to invite the senator to visit Lynchburg [Virginia] and visit Jerry Falwell's school." The *Post* ran the quote.

A couple of weeks later, a Kennedy aid phoned to say, "The senator has decided to accept your invitation." "What invitation?" replied Thomas. "The one for the senator to visit Lynchburg," came the response.

Kennedy made the trip, dined with Falwell and gave a warmly-received speech on tolerance and diversity at Liberty Baptist College (now Liberty University). Thomas says that began his own "treasured friendship" with Kennedy, who met with Falwell "on several subsequent occasions." Cal notes, "More of eternal value was accomplished that night and in the subsequent relationship than years of political bashing and one-upmanship had produced."

Thomas and his friend Bob Beckel, a liberal Democratic strategist who was Walter Mondale's presidential campaign manager, have co-written lively *USA Today* columns called "Common Ground." The two examine important issues—agreeing and disagreeing—but remain good friends. Disagreement needn't torpedo friendship.

A Jew Among the Evangelicals

What do you get when you assign a leftist Jewish journalist to the evangelical Christian beat for major newspapers on both US

coasts?

Maybe you'd expect mutual animosity: "Those wacko God-squaders are at it again," or "The biased secular humanist liberal media is ruining America."

But this leftist Jewish journalist made a significant discovery, one he feels can instruct his colleagues and us all. He says to effectively cover the strange tribe to which he was assigned, it helps to know its members as neighbors and friends.

[Mark Pinsky](#)'s book, *A Jew Among the Evangelicals: A Guide for the Perplexed*,[{2}](#) tells how this "nice Jewish boy from Jersey"[{3}](#) ended up attending church "more often than many Christians" and sometimes more often than he attends his own synagogue.[{4}](#) During his ten years covering religion for the *Los Angeles Times*, he focused on major evangelical leaders and had little connection with grassroots evangelicals.

When he moved to Florida in 1995 to write for the *Orlando Sentinel*, they were everywhere: in the neighborhood, at kids sporting events, birthday parties, PTA meetings, Scouts. Still a committed Jew, Pinsky found they were neither monolithic nor, as *The Washington Post* once claimed, "poor, uneducated and easy to command."[{5}](#)

Disclosure: Pinsky, whom I've known since our university days, is a personal friend. His *Duke Chronicle* column was titled "The Readable Radical." He was at the vanguard of late-1960s campus leftist causes. I didn't always agree with his politics, but I admired his concerns about justice, hypocrisy, and the disenfranchised.

He still votes with the Democratic left, but he also understands the Christian subculture he covers better than many of its members. Mutual respect characterizes his relations with its leaders.

Mark's personal stories of "how people just like you wrestle with feelings, values, and beliefs that touch the core of their beings" provide "a glimpse of someone learning to understand and get along with folks whose convictions differ from his own."[\[6\]](#)

Get to know your intellectual and philosophical adversaries, he recommends. Take them to lunch. Ratchet down the rhetoric. Maybe connection can produce understanding and civility can grow into bridgebuilding.[\[7\]](#)

Not bad advice in a world too-often filled with brickbats and name calling.

Confronting Our Liberal Bias

Religious and political conservatives often complain about bias in secular universities. Here's how two university professors faced that issue in their own teaching

Elizabeth Kiss is president of Agnes Scott College in Atlanta. Before that, she was a Duke political science professor and director of Duke's Kenan Institute for Ethics.[\[8\]](#) With public policy lecturer Alma Blount, she wrote an intriguing 2005 article, "Confronting Our Liberal Bias."[\[9\]](#) They note:

In the wake of the 2004 presidential election, we've witnessed the deep divide in this country around themes of religion and politics, the war in Iraq, and U.S. foreign policy. As faculty members at a leading university, we've also been struck by an uncomfortable realization: we need to confront liberal bias in the academy.

They cite two seminal experiences. In one, "colleagues tried to block an invitation to a conservative faculty member to speak in a class." In another, comments about "how liberal bias threatens open inquiry" met anger and disbelief.

Kiss and Blount considered how their own liberal assumptions subtly influenced their teaching. "Creating a culture of open inquiry on campus," they write, "means we first must face our everyday temptation toward political bias." They continue:

Political bias, from either the left or the right, is corrosive of open inquiry. It is the "in" joke or flippant comment suggesting that all rational people are on your side. It portrays opponents in the worst possible light, suggesting they are ignorant, self-righteous, or evil. Bias breeds an enclave mentality that encourages smug and lazy thinking. It blinds us to the complexity of public issues.

Blount and Kiss are arguing not for academic neutrality, but rather for conviction with disclosure, appreciating dissent as part of the learning process. They advocate political diversity in assigned readings, welcoming differing student viewpoints in class, inviting guest speakers of various perspectives, plus modeling dialogue and debate. "Confronting liberal bias won't be easy," they conclude. "But it's the right thing to do."

Their refreshing candor is all too rare. An excellent example for all sides in making civil discourse more "civil."

"Gotcha" Politics

President Bill Clinton's Special Counsel and scandal spokesperson was Lanny Davis, a prominent attorney and now-ubiquitous television figure.

Now, some of my readers may consider Bill and Hillary Clinton to be Mr. and Mrs. Antichrist. But I ask you to please segment your emotions about the Clintons momentarily to consider their former coworker's passionate appeal for civility in public discourse.

Davis, a liberal Democrat, has authored an important book, *Scandal: How "Gotcha" Politics is Destroying America*.^{10} He says, "The politics of healthy debate have been replaced by the politics of personal destruction, and the media, politicians, lawyers, and the Internet revolution are all complicit," as are the American people who reward the politicians and consume the media.^{11} With admirable transparency, he admits concerning parts of his past, "I am ashamed to say all this today—but I was just as much caught up in the gotcha culture as partisans on the Republican right."^{12} He regrets having jumped into "food fight" TV on occasion,^{13} and admits to some past blindness to "politically expedient hypocrisy."^{14}

Davis often seeks to build bridges. During the 1992 Democratic National Convention, Pennsylvania Governor Robert Casey "had been barred from delivering an anti-abortion, 'pro-life' speech to the convention." Davis, who is pro-choice, asked some of his fellow liberal delegates to join him in a resolution to allow Casey to speak, in the name of freedom of expression and tolerance of dissent. Alas, he was shouted down.^{15}

In 2000, his longtime friend Senator Joseph Lieberman—Democratic vice presidential candidate and an orthodox Jew—garnered liberal criticism for "bringing up God too much." Reflecting on a famous Abraham Lincoln speech invoking divine assistance and encouraging prayer, Lanny wondered, "Would my liberal friends have regarded Abraham Lincoln as 'bringing up God too much?'"^{16} He decries intolerance and "contempt or disrespect for the deeply religious and those who believe in the power of prayer."^{17}

At the 2006 National Prayer Breakfast, rock star Bono, advocating bipartisan cooperation to fight poverty, cited Jesus' statement, "Do to others as you would have them do to you."^{18} "You cannot believe in Bono's words," comments Davis, "without being tolerant of those whose religious faith

leads them to political views vastly different from that of a pro-choice Democrat.”[\[19\]](#)

May his tribe increase.

Bridgebuilding: From Food Fights to Finding Common Ground

How can we cultivate respect and learn to disagree without being disagreeable? Maybe you’ll enjoy this story.

I entered university in the turbulent late 1960s. The Vietnam War, Civil rights, sexual revolution, and campus upheaval permeated our lives. The fraternity I joined was quite diverse. We had political liberals and conservatives; athletes and scholars; atheists, agnostics, Christians, and Jews. Late night bull sessions kept us engaged and learning from each other.

When I was a freshman and a new believer in Jesus, our fraternity agreed to allow a Campus Crusade for Christ meeting in the chapter room. I posted a sign inside the front door for all the guys to see, announcing the date and time. As a gag, at the bottom I wrote “Attendance Mandatory.” Needless to say, the sign quickly filled with graffiti. My favorite said, “Jesus and His Lambda Chi Alpha disciples will be autographing Bibles in the hallway during intermission.”

The night of the meeting, one fraternity brother welcomed visitors from the head of the stairway, literally tied to a cross. Some members heckled the speaker, who gracefully engaged them in dialogue. He demonstrated how to disagree but remain friendly.

Our diversity taught me lots about tolerance and civility. We lived, worked, studied, and played together and forged friendships that have endured despite time and distance. Many of us still gather for reunions and still enjoy each others’

company. That environment was a crucible that helped me develop communication and relationship skills.

How can you cultivate civility? Consider three suggestions:

1. Learn about views different from your own. Read what others believe and ascertain why they feel and think as they do. Ask yourself how you might feel in their situation.

2. Discover Common Ground. Starting where you agree can help overcome many emotional barriers.

3. Befriend people with differing views. Friendly conversation or shared meals can help open hearts. Conservatives, take a liberal to lunch, and vice versa.

Paul, an early follower of Jesus, had good advice on how to deal with those who differ. It applies in many contexts. He wrote:

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. {20}

Notes

1. Cal Thomas and Ed Dobson, *Blinded By Might: Can the Religious Right Save America?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999) 55-56.
2. Mark I. Pinsky, *A Jew Among the Evangelicals: A Guide for the Perplexed* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006).
3. Ibid., vii.
4. Ibid., 18.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid., vii.
7. Ibid., 148.
8. <http://kenan.ethics.duke.edu>

9. Alma Blount and Elizabeth Kiss, "Confronting Our Liberal Bias," *Duke University News & Communications*, May 19, 2005; http://www.dukenews.duke.edu/2005/05/politicalbias._print.ht, accessed March 4, 2007. Article first appeared in the Spring 2005 issue of the *KIE Connection* newsletter, produced by the Kenan Institute for Ethics; <http://kenan.ethics.duke.edu/newsletter/KIE.pdf>, accessed March 4, 2007.
10. Lanny Davis, *Scandal: How "Gotcha" Politics is Destroying America* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).
11. Ibid., 199.
12. Ibid., 188.
13. Ibid., 88.
14. Ibid., 125-126.
15. Ibid., 211-212.
16. Ibid., 212.
17. Ibid., 214.
18. Luke 6:31 NIV.
19. Davis, op. cit., 213.
20. Colossians 4:5-6 NIV.

© 2007 Probe Ministries

"Your Ministry Is Devoted to Exclusion"

It is amazing that your ministry devotes so much to exclusion.

We are very aware that our views are not popular, but much of what Jesus claimed and said wasn't popular either. And what we believe and teach is based on what He said. Such as "I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father except by Me." That's about as exclusivistic as anyone can

get.

Yet, He also said that after He was crucified, He'd come back to life three days later, and He did. So that's a pretty convincing argument for believing that what He said was true. About God, about the nature of man, about heaven and hell, about other religions, about sexuality, about philosophy, about ethics. . . the whole ball of wax.

Thanks for writing.

Sue Bohlin

© 2007 Probe Ministries