

Message 3: Converse, Don't Confront

(Being a non-threatening person) - Adapted from an outline by David Mann.

INTRODUCTION

Have you ever been in a conversation where it's going fine and then someone suddenly drops a bomb? A statement that was like a bomb!

A statement like, "I'm just sick of the Treaty of Waitangi" or "You know those 5G towers spread coronavirus" or "vaccinations cause autism." A statement that suddenly causes your eyes to glaze over and you start disconnecting. *

I recently watched 'The Morning Show' on Apple Plus - a brilliant piece of TV about the 'Me Too Movement'. In the show the fictional Jackson Bradley gets frustrated on her first morning of national TV and lists off a pile of things she's done, "Heck, I had an abortion when I was 15 years old." All around the studio you can see the fire alarms going off in people's eyes.

When we enter spiritual conversations it's like entering a mine-field, my aim today is to help you avoid setting off a mine, and to respond gently if someone sets off a mine for you.

Dave Mann, (who we are indebted to for the outline of these talks), talks about 'sour notes': When you are listening to a vocal quartet, but one person is singing a little out of tune. That's a 'sour note'. The same happens in conversations. People say things that sound wrong to us. Sometimes Christians say things that may sound like a 'sour note' to others. And sometimes people we are talking to say things that sound like a 'sour note' to us. Today let's see these 'sour notes' as our opportunities.

Two weeks ago Keith opened our series by talking about a conversational approach to sharing faith, and he started with the idea that a great conversation starts with a great question. At the right time a question like, "Are you a spiritual person?" can be a great launch into a two-way conversation about faith.

Last week Cate introduced us to Frank Ritchie and his interest in the views of his followers on Twitter. We remembered that many people in New Zealand have an interest in spiritual things but are put off by 'organised religion'.

How can we engage them in non-threatening two-way conversations about spiritual things?

Today we are looking at when we disagree...

- ...instead of disagreeing (which would end the conversation),
- (1) affirming what we can, and
- (2) asking a question about what we 'don't understand'

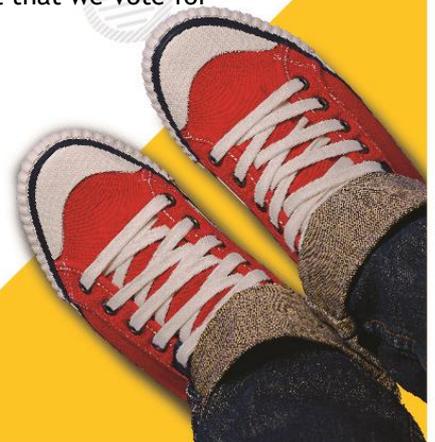
These are basic conversation skills, but we often forget them in conversations about spiritual things. Dave Mann gives us three great questions to use:

What do you mean by that?
Where did you get that idea from?
Have you considered...?

If you meet someone this week who says, "I just think it's so important that we vote for euthanasia in the referendum." What will you say?

It's tempting to go into debate. But why not enquire first

You might say, Yeah It's awful watching people in pain.
What do think is important in the referendum?
What's a version of question one?.



Today I'm talking about Converse, don't confront.

That means keeping the conversation going and not shutting it down.

- *In some families, if someone says something that is a load of rubbish, they'll say "That's a load of rubbish!"*
- *In other families - they avoid conflict, so when someone says something controversial, they say 'Oh' - and then say nothing.*
- *While in other families, when someone says something controversial they say "Oh - how interesting, what makes you think that?" And they say this with such interest that you even feel affirmed.*

Which one is - is going to keep the conversation going?

Which one is you / your family of origin?

Let's look at an account of Jesus talking with someone who could have felt threatened - and then we'll discuss how to have non-threatening two-way conversations.

John 8:1-11

Jesus returned to the Mount of Olives, but early the next morning he was back again at the Temple. A crowd soon gathered, and he sat down and taught them. As he was speaking, the teachers of religious law and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in the act of adultery. They put her in front of the crowd.

"Teacher," they said to Jesus, "this woman was caught in the act of adultery. The law of Moses says to stone her. What do you say?"

They were trying to trap him into saying something they could use against him, but Jesus stooped down and wrote in the dust with his finger.

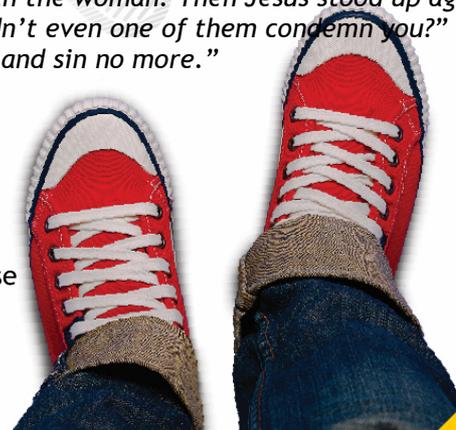
- **The context:** The temple guards had been sent by the Pharisees to arrest Jesus, because they considered his claims blasphemous (John 7:32). However the guards had not arrested him, because they were awed by all that Jesus did and said (John 7:45-46). So - that Jesus was even in the temple first thing the next morning was remarkably bold. *Things were very tense!*
- **The immediate situation:** They are trying to trap Jesus.
- **The theological context:** The law of Moses set down the death penalty for both parties to adultery. It was pretty extreme, but that was the Torah. (Leviticus 20:10).
- **The cultural context:** However, they were under Roman occupation, and the Romans had removed the authority of the religious leaders to give the death penalty. Had Jesus said they should obey the Jewish law by stoning her, Jesus would have been in trouble with the Romans
- So - does that mean Jesus should *not* agree with applying the Law?
 - o If he was lax with the law - he would be condemned by the Jews
 - o If he applied the law - he would be condemned by the Romans
 - o It was a catch 22 situation (a trap)!

They kept demanding an answer, so he stood up again and said, "All right, but let the one who has never sinned throw the first stone!" Then he stooped down again and wrote in the dust. When the accusers heard this, they slipped away one by one, beginning with the oldest, until only Jesus was left in the middle of the crowd with the woman. Then Jesus stood up again and said to the woman, "Where are your accusers? Didn't even one of them condemn you?" "No, Lord," she said. And Jesus said, "Neither do I. Go and sin no more."

Let's consider how Jesus responded.

Firstly, we don't have to answer every question. Jesus' first response was just to stoop down and write in the sand without saying anything.

- Maybe he was writing something relevant
- Maybe he was taking time to think, because he knew the danger of speaking too quickly.



- Secondly - Jesus often replied to a question with a question - to return the onus of proof to the enquirer/accuser. In this case he did something very similar. He asked them a kind of question, were they able to condemn?
- Thirdly, he wrote in the sand again.
We don't know what he wrote - but many have suggested that he wrote down different sins, and that the religious leaders left one-by-one as they recognized their sins.

Notice - did Jesus ever disagree with the statement that this woman deserved death for her sin? (No) Technically the woman and her partner, under the law at the time were destroying the social fabric and were subject to the death penalty.

- However, there are few things we can note here:
 1. Jesus was the only one who had a right to still stand there - when all others left, because he was sinless.
 2. The wider teachings of Jesus, and of the New Testament, affirm the law - but changes who pays the penalty for sin, although some consequences for sin remain.
 3. There was a wider issue of justice here -
 - Where was the man who she was caught in adultery with?
 - This woman wasn't brought to Jesus because of a quest for justice. She was brought to Jesus to set a trap!
 4. Finally - Jesus said he didn't condemn her and then gave her a second chance with the instruction 'go sin no more'. *Why?* Because through him grace and forgiveness are available for the repentant, through faith in Him. Jesus was *on his way to Calvary, where he would die for the sins of the woman.*

Do you think the woman felt threatened by Jesus? (Initially maybe) I don't think she ended up feeling threatened by him. Yet he didn't excuse her sin. What he did was believe in her.

Application

One of the most remarkable characteristics of Christ was the fact that ordinary messy people didn't feel threatened by him.

- He was invited by them to meals
- And ate with them without being at all threatening.

In contrast, Jesus was threatening to the proud, the Pharisees and teachers of the law.

- He was invited by them to meals by them also
- But at these meals he was scrutinized, and they were looking for ways to criticize, undermine or accuse him.

Our topic today is 'conversation - not confrontation' - and the question is, what is the key to being non-threatening when discussing topics in which people will have differing views?

- This is really important for us as Christians, because we want to be able to talk to our neighbours in open conversations, without awkwardness, and especially without them feeling 'preached at'.
- This is something I'd love to do more - to get down and chat to people about faith, not try to convert them like a notch on my belt, but to be able to talk people about important things like faith more easily.
- Here I really like Dave's approach because he says - 'Drop the agenda' - don't 'try' to convert people, just try to talk about spiritual matters more. And start by listening. Cultivate a real interest in what people are thinking about spiritual matters and opportunities will come up. Next week we'll talk about what to say at the right time.



‘Out of the overflow of the heart, the mouth speaks’ (Luke 6:45)

In other words - the key to creating the feel of conversation is motive that decides tone.

If our motive is to share, to talk about faith, without imposing, without judging - then the conversations will open up.

Let me Illustrate - Salesperson:

Have you ever had a salesperson come up to you on the street? How long did it take to recognize he/she was a salesperson? I went for a coffee at Robert Harris last week and a guy was trying to sell me his book. I knew straight away he had an agenda, he didn't want to know about me and if I might be interested, he talked at me for ages.

I used to work for the Alpha Course, I would sell Alpha, but you know what I really believed in Alpha, it wasn't hard to sell and I didn't need to push, because I knew my job was to explain Alpha and say I'm here, and people would come back to me, because Alpha is still a really good product. Yes, my job was to keep the brand out there, but the product sold itself. That is so different to selling snake oil.

And this is the key dynamic for our spiritual conversations

- Firstly, listen to our mate's story, we might learn something, don't react, don't judge, you might see God at work, you might offer to pray for a situation. In week one we said, you don't need to jump in too soon with Jesus is the answer.
- Secondly, just be a brand ambassador for Jesus, when asked say that Jesus has been the good to you. BUT, if our agenda is to 'preach at them', to 'tell' them to 'change' them - without even listening that's when the conversation starts awkward.

○ **Motive beats technique every time, ‘Out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks’**

Conclusion: Motive feeds conversation rather than confrontation

If we come to spiritual conversations wanting to meet, understand and discuss with other people, people will have no reason to feel threatened.

3 Final Points.

- **Respect their freewill** - our motive is not to coerce or convert anyone, ultimately only they can decide for (or against) Christ anyway. God does the converting.
- **If we are ever to share something that hasn't come about within the natural flow of the conversation** - we ask permission first, and then share with a humble tone, and invite a conversation at the conclusion. "Can I take you out for lunch and talk about faith?" This kind of approach is respectful, and usually well received.
- **Respect that everyone is on a spiritual journey and have experiences and thoughts** - so our motive is to listen more than we speak, and then to wisely
(1) affirm what we agree with (2) ask about what we 'don't understand'

In other words - we come with the aim of discovering what we can agree together by asking questions - to build upon that through encouraging and sharing hope (CONVERSATION) rather than to find what we see as WRONG - so we might condemn it and change it by telling them what we believe to be true (CONFRONTATION)

It's Ok to go deeper in the discussion, but so often we don't get off first base because we close down the conversations.

Once you have been talking for a while you can share all kinds of points, you may also have discovered where the mines are buried and you can avoid them.

Let's try not to set off a mine in our first sentence.

