

## Sharing our Faith with Our Friends

By Greg Ogden

### Chapter 19 of Discipleship Essentials

Is there anything that produces more anxiety than the pressure we experience in our call to be witnesses? Rebecca Pippert conveys our experience when she describes her anxieties about witnessing in her book *Out of the Salt Shaker and into the World*. She was laboring at that time under a view of witnessing that could be summarized as “offending people for Jesus’ sake.” She had gotten the impression that witnessing was where she trapped an unsuspecting victim who was forced to listen to her speech about Jesus. With this image of witnessing she writes, “The result was that I would put off witnessing as long as possible. Whenever the guilt became too great to bear, I overpowered the nearest non-Christian with a nonstop running monolog and then dashed away thinking, ‘Whew! Well, I did it. It’s spring and hopefully the guilt won’t overcome me again till winter.’” The next potential victim was hoping the same.

To be effective witnesses we need anxiety reduction. How can we lower the anxiety level so that we can allow a natural joy to flow from our lives with the belief that we have the best news to offer? There is nothing like anxiety to block authenticity. In order for our witness to be compelling it must be experienced as congruent with who we are. The last thing people want is to be our project, someone we are working on.

The most effective witness occurs in the context of authentic, caring relationships. Relationships built over time with trust have earned us the right to share the difference that Jesus Christ makes in our lives. We don’t want witnessing pressure to build in us to such an extent that we regurgitate the gospel over one hapless victim merely to relieve the pressure for the time being.

Contained in John 1:35-42 are six anxiety reducing principles that free us to witness in the context of authentic friendship.

#### **Reduce Self-Consciousness And Increase God-Consciousness.**

Our anxiety is heightened when we are so self-conscious that we are afraid what we might say will reflect badly on us. If we are too concerned with what people will think of us, then we will be tied up in knots. We need to lose ourselves in the joy of Jesus.

What we want is to become like John the Baptist, who was not concerned about his own reputation but about the reputation of Jesus. What is impressive about John the Baptist is his willingness to let his disciples follow Jesus. “The next day John was there again with two of his disciples. When he saw Jesus passing by, he said, ‘Look the Lamb of God!’ when the two disciples heard him say this, they followed Jesus” (John 1:35-37).

One of the hardest things to do is to take second place, especially if you are in first place. John had acquired his group of followers. Now there was one on the scene who eclipsed him and John willingly pointed his followers to Jesus.

John's lack of pride is remarkable. Pride is competitive at its root. It is an unnatural act of the sinful heart to exalt someone else's glory and diminish our own. So much of our worth is derived from comparing how we are doing to how others are doing. When pastors get together the undercurrent is comparing how their churches are doing, especially whether they are growing. We are naturally inclined to want recognition. I am ashamed to say how much I feed off people's comments about my effect on their lives. And as much as I like to take pleasure in shining the spotlight on others, I still twinge with the desire for recognition, especially when I am feeling overlooked or underappreciated.

How liberating it would be to be free of self-consciousness, as John the Baptist was. Humility is an anxiety reducer. "People with humility don't think less of themselves, they just think of themselves less." Jim Elliot defined witnessing as a "bunch of nobodies trying to exalt somebody." Thomas Merton caps this decrease in self-absorption when he writes, "When humility delivers a person from attachment to their own works and reputation, they discover true joy is only possible when we have completely forgotten ourselves."

### **Our Witness is Only One of Many Influences.**

The two disciples who responded to John's designation of Jesus as the Lamb of God were fully prepared to follow him. We meet them at the very end of a long process of preparation that got them to this point of openness. What we don't see are the many people and influences that the Spirit used to get them there. I have been privileged to pray with people to receive Jesus in their lives, knowing that I did nothing to get them to that point. I have often visualized myself with a basket in my hand, standing under a tree of ripened fruit, waiting for it to fall into my basket. Later they tell me the story off the friends, family and life situations that brought them to this point over a long period of time.

Think of conversion as a journey from one to one hundred. We may intersect someone's life at the beginning, middle or end of that journey, but we most likely will be only five of the one hundred points along the scale. We may be the one who destroys someone's negative stereotypes of what it means to be a Christian. A member of my congregation told me that his son paid me the highest compliment. "What was it?" I asked. He said, "You don't act like a pastor." Given this young man's negative association with pastors, I had given him hope that things could be different. Every life is in process, and we intersect somewhere along the way.

Anxiety comes by putting pressure on ourselves to be the one who takes a person from one to one hundred. We think that we must plant the seed, water it, nurture it to maturity and bring in the harvest. Even Paul didn't put that kind of pressure on himself. Paul wrote to the Corinthians, "I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything but only God, who makes things grow" (1 Corinthians 3:6-7). May our prayer be simply that God would use us to help every person we know to take that next step in their journey toward the decision to follow Jesus.

### **Listen by Asking Probing Questions.**

"Turning around, Jesus saw (the two disciples) following and asked, 'What do you want?'" (John 1:38). To our ears that question sounds more rude and abrupt than is meant. The NRSV better captures the tone and intent of Jesus: "What are you looking for?"

Jesus was the master at guiding the discoveries of the heart with great questions. Telling people something that are not ready to hear only raises their defenses. Compassionately asked questions are like the Trojan horse that gets through the gate. Good questions are used by the Holy Spirit to crack open a heart that can lead to a full-fledged quest.

I am convinced that if our witness consisted of becoming caring listeners who attend to the needs of those around us, there would be no end of the opportunities to share Christ. On the surface people, may not evidence much spiritual hunger, but I believe that hunger lurks just below the surface. In our secular age we don't usually pepper polite conversation with questions such as "What is the meaning of life? What is your purpose for breathing the air on this planet? What kind of God do you believe in?" But if we listen to people's self-doubts—about their jobs, the challenges of raising kids—we will get below the surface to spiritual matters. Our message of hope will be pertinent to the needs of people are expressing.

A poem, "Cold Water, Hot Coffee," expresses the challenge to listen. Sometimes that cup of cold water, turns out to be a cup of hot coffee, and what we're asked to do is to pour it...and to listen. Sometimes we Christians in our enthusiasm think we were asked to save the world, when what we were asked to do is to go into it and tell God's story to people in need of some good news. Anxious activists forget that just listening is an act of compassion. Driven disciples forget that just listening is an act of faithfulness. Guilty givers forget that just listening is an act of stewardship. Since we church people have a tendency to be driven and anxious and guilt-ridden perhaps we should read the directions again, and pour a cup of hot coffee and listen to His name. (Anonymous)

### **Ask People to Investigate Jesus.**

In response to Jesus' question, the two disciples responded with a question that conveyed what they were looking for. "They said, 'Rabbi' (which means Teacher), 'where are you staying?' 'Come,' he replied, 'and you will see.' So they went and saw where he was staying, and spent that day with him. It was about the tenth hour" (John 1:38-39). The disciples didn't want a casual and brief conversation with Jesus in the streets, but they wanted to spend some substantial time with Jesus, checking out his authenticity.

Eventually any genuine spiritual quest must center on an investigation of Jesus. What I love about the Gospel of John is that every passage we study in this book leads us to ask the questions, "Who does this Jesus think he is anyway?"

Jesus is the destination. The journey and search end with Jesus, but in many people's minds Jesus is just another way station in Life's journey. There is no destination, no place to arrive. All truth is personal or individual. Feelings tell us the truth that is personally designed to work for us. A campus Christian worker made one of the great spiritual observations of our day when he said, "It is all right today to search for truth, as long as you don't find it." It is the quest that counts. Be on the journey, but don't arrive. Yet as we understand Jesus' truth claim, he is not just another point along the way. He is the One where the quest stops. At some point we must ask people to examine Jesus. Ask people to read John or Mark and ask, "What are your impressions of this person? What do you say about him?" Ultimately that is the key question.

### **Share out of Joy.**

Witness at its best is contagious joy. Andrew, the brother of Peter, embodies sharing his faith with his friends. For Andrew being a witness was natural. “Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother, was one of the two who heard what John had said and who had followed Jesus. The first thing Andrew did was to find his brother Simon, and tell him, ‘We have found the Messiah’ (that is, the Christ)” (John 1:40-41). Andrew couldn’t contain the joy of his discovery. He had to tell his brother what he had found.

I pray that I would be like the Christians who influenced the lives of Sheldon and Davy Vanauken. Sheldon describes one of the early points in his process of coming to faith in Christ. It was the quality of Christians he and his wife, Davy, met at Oxford University that caused them to consider following Christ. A group of five Christians became their closest friends. “These were our first friends, close friends. More to the point, perhaps, all five were keen, deeply committed Christians. But we liked them so much that we forgave them for it. We began, hardly knowing we were doing it, to revise our opinions, not of Christianity but of Christians. Our fundamental assumption had been that all Christians were necessarily stuffy, hide-bound, or stupid—people to keep ones distance from. Then the astonishing fact sank home: our contemporaries could be at once highly intelligent, civilized, witty, fun to be with and Christian.” There is nothing like contagious joy to share our faith with our friends.

### **Their Best Selves Await them.**

To know that Christ turns us into what we were designed by God to fully be is to offer the best gift to someone. Peter discovered his potential in his first encounter with Christ. “And he (Andrew) brought him (Peter) to Jesus. Jesus looked at him and said, ‘You are Simon son of John. You will be called Cephas’ (which when translated, is Peter)” (John 1:42). Cephas means “rock.” Jesus certainly didn’t get that name for Peter by looking at who he was at that moment. Rock is about the last word you would use to describe Peter’s personality and temperament; instead words like impulsive, volatile and unreliable come to mind. But John says that Jesus “looked at him,” meaning he saw beyond the surface into Peter’s heart. Jesus saw Peter for what he would become, not for what he was at the moment. Our best self awaits us in Jesus.

Am I a better person on the way to becoming my best because of Jesus? You had better believe it. I’ve got a long way to go, but you don’t know how far I’ve come. Has Christ made a difference in my life? Without a doubt. He took a guy full of fear and transformed him into one with risk-taking confidence; he freed me as a father to give affection, though I had a father who did not know how to do that; he filled me with a passion to see his people mobilized for ministry. Would my life be different without Christ? I shudder to think of what I would be like. So when I offer Jesus to someone, I am giving them the opportunity to discover their best self, which awaits them in Christ.

Are you stopped in your tracks with anxiety when it comes to being a witness for Jesus? My prayer is that you have discovered in this passage one or more truths that allow you to transform witnessing from an anxiety-ridden, guilt ridden ineptitude to a joyful privilege. Perhaps then the anxiety will recede and in a relaxed, caring way Jesus will authentically make himself known through you.