

Lesson – Find out What Others Believe

“You can learn a lot more from listening than you can from talking. Find someone with whom you do not agree in the slightest and ask them to explain themselves at length. Then take a seat, shut your mouth, and do not argue back. It is physically impossible to listen with your mouth open.” John Moe, Radio host and author of *Conservatize Me*

As a Christian I am often associated with people that are described as pushy, opinionated, know it alls, judgemental, and close-minded. Why is this? I suggest perhaps because the average Christian has an agenda. Each conversation with an unbeliever about religion is fuelled by an end goal; get them to agree that yours is the right one, get them to become a Christian. I can count on one hand the number of Christians I've met who did *not* have this agenda. I myself was one for many years. With that being my end goal in conversations with people, then it is no wonder I was seen in this light. This end goal leads to ignoring what the other person has to say and only trying to get them to agree. And that *does* make me close minded, but not in the sense they may mean it. There are many wrong, but understandable, interpretations of what a Christian is, especially in the western world. I do not need a label. I just love God, love others and help others love God. I have a relationship with Jesus Christ and everything I do and say flows from that.

I would like to share my new end goal that has lead to transformational conversations and challenges my thinking thus helping me form friendships with strangers and deeper relationships with friends. My end goal is just to *love* the person I am speaking with. Period. How does that change the conversation? One of the intriguing aspects of what I do is travelling to nations around the world where people have a faith so different to mine and so often, a faith I know very little about. So it seems a bit presumptuous to assume that they are wrong and I am right before the conversation goes any further or even sometimes begins!

One of my favourite conversation starters is about religion. I know, taboo! In the United States we have two taboo subjects: politics and religion. But I don't care what people think about me, I love talking about religious beliefs and it is not because I like to argue or debate because if you know me, you realize I do not like to do either. It is not because I like to share my faith. In fact, I do not usually even share what I believe; I let my questions speak for themselves. Questions of love, interest, and authenticity. I ask questions because I really want to know the answers but also because I care about the person I am speaking to even strangers. I am interested in what they believe and why they believe it. I want to know the ins and outs, their feelings, heart, and fears. I learn a lot about people by asking questions about this subject and it shows them that I am interested in *them*, not in having a debate.

Invariably at some point, usually a half hour later, they ask me the same questions I asked them, questions they would have otherwise never asked! By first showing them I was willing to listen to their views, they listen to mine. Sometimes our time runs out before the conversation leads to what I believe and I am totally ok with that. In fact, sometimes I

Easy Lessons Learned The Hard Way
By Sarah Brickman

am happy because I hope that my love and actions have spoken for themselves and impacted that person without my faith being verbalized. You read that right! I do not want people to hear what I believe. I want them to see it in action!

At a birthday party I went to recently I met a woman that had come with a friend of mine that did not know anyone. I immediately wanted to speak to her, make her feel welcome, and find out more about her. I didn't even know her name, but I sat down and started asking questions. People love to talk about themselves and the things they enjoy. I only had to ask a few questions over the course of the next couple hours because our conversations just flowed. As I showed interest in her I learned things that she probably would not have shared with her family or even a therapist. Just by asking questions, we delved into the depths of her heart straight to her passions, her fears, her childhood, and her goals for the future. She opened up to me as if we were lifelong friends! I was fascinated by her beliefs, how she had accumulated them, and how I could see them shaping who she was. Though on the surface they seemed similar to mine, they were drastically different when we got down to details. But I never felt the need to tell her, I just listened. During a break for food, a friend of mine suggested that I bring Jesus Christ into the conversation. My heart sank as I realized that he just did not get it yet. It is not about changing her beliefs through conversation or about my agenda. It was simply about loving her and showing that love by listening to her, showing interest in who she is, and encouraging her in her dreams. That conversation may transform her view of Christians! It may encourage her to pursue her dream! It may challenge her thinking, but it is not my job to change her or to push my faith on her. I am simply called to love.

I challenge you to find a Christian and ask them what they believe and why. Then ask a homosexual. Ask a Catholic. Ask a politician. Ask a fisherman. Ask a homeless person. Ask the stranger sitting next to you. I am not saying to ask them the exact phrase "What do you believe?" but I am challenging you to change your agenda in the conversation to finding out about them and why they are the way they are. Have a conversation with random people from all walks of life and find out what has shaped their thinking, and allow them to challenge yours! Listen to their hearts. Do not talk about yourself until they ask and if they never ask, then practice not telling them. Let your actions speak louder than your words. Challenge those around you and allow their responses to challenge you!

Recently a friend of mine was sceptical and dare I say even critical of something I believed whole heartedly in. She felt this way based on watching its affects from a far in people and the community while my view was based on personal experience. I asked questions driving the conversation forward instead of being obstinate in my views and beliefs and thus the conversation flourished. Because my friend had clearly been hurt inadvertently by this "Christian" practice I wanted to discover what happened and why. If it was something I may inadvertently do in the future I needed to hear more so I could avoid hurting someone else. As it turned out, the hurt and unfortunate scepticism came from a core belief that was drastically different than how I live my life. I could have put up my defences at the beginning of the conversation and argued my defence. I could have taken a personal offence and assumed my friend wholly disagreed with something I am passionate about, but instead I took the time to listen. In the end, we discovered we have

very similar views, something neither of us would have thought at the start of the conversation.

One final reason that I enjoy this approach is because it takes the pressure off and I can really just enjoy conversations. I do not have to know all the answers; I do not have to figure out how they might out argue me. I do not have to be knowledgeable because I am simply listening and asking questions. What this does is help them think about things they may have never thought about before. In asking how one feels about something within their faith, it forces them to think about whether it is something they agree with or something they have just always gone along with. In getting them thinking, God will have opportunities to speak to them and answer their questions and challenge them in continuing in whatever their chosen faith is. Challenge others simply by asking questions and listening to their answers. Find out what others believe and why. You will become a better person because of it!

Challenge Your Thinking

1. Find a friend of a different faith and ask them questions about their faith. Ask questions like “What do you believe about...” “What does your religion say about...?” “How do you feel about that belief?”
2. After having this conversation with your friend, journal about what was difficult for you. What was easy? What stood out to you? How can you rephrase your questions so there is no room for offence? Dissect your conversation and write down your findings.
3. Now repeat steps one and two with a different friend or even a stranger.