

A STORY FROM NEIL COLE ... ABOUT JOHN

I teach people to listen for three things when talking with an unbeliever: pains, passions and purposes. These are the deeper parts of a person's soul and will probably not come out early in the course of a conversation. We don't entrust these things to just anyone. We want to make sure we can trust a person before we share what really makes us tick. Strobel points out that often people will first share something they don't believe strongly in to see if they can trust someone with the deeper, more vulnerable stuff. If we play the antagonist immediately they will never move on to a deeper heart issue and evangelism will remain at a surface level.

Let me give you an example to illustrate this from our ministry. John was a self-proclaimed Satanist. He is also one of the most intelligent men I have met. He reads almost a book a day and can quote ancient Greek poets off the top of his head. We met John by building relationships with people at a local coffeehouse called Portfolios.

One evening we had a visitor at Awakening Chapel who is an expert at using apologetics in evangelism. This particular man had taught me much and I was excited to have him with us. After experiencing an Awakening Chapel time of worship he commented, "Oh, I see if you lower the lights and use candles and incense you can reach postmoderns." I must admit I was a little disappointed; Awakening is so much more than that. I decided that the best way for him to see the heart of this new church was to take him to Portfolios to see where we do much of our relational evangelism.

At Portfolios, my friend ran into John the Satanist (not to be confused with John the Baptist). In the course of their conversation John made some comment about what a good man and teacher Jesus was. This started my missionary friend on a logical message about how based on Jesus' own words He is either the Lord or He is a liar or He is a lunatic...but He can't logically be just a good man or teacher. The talented evangelist got as far as the first point and John then jumped in and finished the rest of the argument. Then he commented that he had read all of C. S. Lewis' works and that Lewis was one of his favorite authors. Then John turned and walked away untouched by the attempts of the evangelist.

About a week later, John came to Awakening. During a break in the service he went outside with some of our newer converts to smoke a cigarette and chat. I noticed John was talking with a young girl named Michelle whom had just recently come to Christ herself. Remembering how easily John dispatched the veteran evangelist, I was very concerned for her. A guy like John could really confuse a new believer like Michelle. Later I pulled her aside to see how she was doing. I asked, "I noticed you were talking with John. He's a handful. Are you okay?" She said, "Oh yeah, I'm fine. He just kept talking and talking and I kept listening and listening. Finally at one point he stopped to take a breath and I jumped in and said, 'John, you're too smart for me. I can't keep up with you.'" Then she paused and added, "but I sense that you're lonely. I was lonely too. For many years I would go to bed at night and wonder if anyone in the whole universe cared if I would wake up the next day. Then I met Jesus and I don't go to bed lonely anymore. I know that Jesus loves me and He cares about what is going on in my life."

For the first time in his life, John was silent. Michelle had struck right to the heart of John's soul. This wasn't a peripheral discussion about theoretic facts. This was his life, his need, his core identity.

It isn't what you know that is going to touch the hearts of this emerging generation...it's who you know. If you are willing to listen and share personally with people the difference Christ has made in your life you can be effective in reaching the lost. We need to introduce the postmodern to truth incarnate rather than a defense of propositional facts.

A short time later I was having a conversation with John. He casually mentioned to me that he was thinking of changing his religion. I thought to myself, "Any change is a step in the right direction." I asked, "Oh, what are you thinking of changing it to?" He said, "I'm either going to become a Christian or a Buddhist." At that point I had a choice, I could ask him why on earth he would want to be a Buddhist and then he could defend Buddhism for the next hour, or, I could ask him why on earth he'd want to be a Christian and let him defend Jesus to me. I chose the latter. This time, my instincts proved wise. He said, "The thing that attracts me to Christianity more than any other religion is the concept of grace. No other religion has this. The fact that we can receive God's blessings without having to do anything is amazing to me." Then he went on to describe the cross and how Jesus died even though we are all sinners and John's eyes watered up. He preached the gospel to himself that day—and if he'd given an altar call I'd have gone forward myself! John didn't receive Jesus that afternoon, but I believe he is on the way, he is in the process. It is the kindness of people that has made the difference. More than that, it is the kindness of God that will lead him to repentance, not our own intelligent arguments.

Paul wrote to the Colossians: "Devote yourselves to prayer, keeping alert in it with an attitude of thanksgiving; praying at the same time for us as well, that God will open up to us a door for the word, so that we may speak forth the mystery of Christ, for which I have also been imprisoned; that I may make it clear in the way I ought to speak. Conduct yourself with wisdom toward outsiders, making the most of the opportunity. Let your speech always be with grace, as though seasoned with salt, so that you will know how to answer everyone."

Of course, each person is different and there is not one absolute method that will work for everyone. What works for one may not work for another...

- - - from the article, "Sharing the Truth in a Postmodern Context" by Neil Cole at <http://www.cmaresources.org/article/sharing-the-truth-in-a-postmodern-context>