Productive Conversations in a Divided World

As followers of Jesus, we are called to be peacemakers in a culture that is increasingly chaotic. While it is easy to surround ourselves with people who look, think and act like us, Christ-followers are salt and light in a divided and dark world. Is it possible for Christ-followers to interact with others, regardless of their beliefs and values, without our blood pressure rising? Further, is it possible to represent the love of Christ to someone else regardless of his/her beliefs or values? The answer to both of these questions is YES—with God's help!

Here are some practical steps to have productive conversations with people you know.

BE HONEST

The most productive conversations occur with people you already have a relationship with, but who also think, act or believe differently than you—including other Christ followers. If you are pursuing a conversation in hopes of selling something, proving something or changing someone, people will smell your insincerity from a mile away. These conversations are built on the premise that all people are created in the image of God, and their thoughts and feelings matter—even if they are wrong or you do not agree with them. Additionally, productive conversations include letting someone know where you stand.

"I think..."
"I believe..."
"I have a different view on that."
"Can you help me understand why...?"

Remember your goal is not to prove you are "right," lecture or convert them to Christianity. Instead, it is to have a meaningful conversation with someone you value, slowly building trust and respect over time. Therefore, if you learn something new or change your perspective, be honest.

"Thanks, I never thought of that before."
"Wow, I didn't know about that."

BE PRAYERFUL

Only in partnership with God are people's minds and lives changed. When we are commanded to be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, God wants to empower us to live this way. So start praying for the people you have a relationship with who are different than you. Begin by asking God to give you a humble heart open to productive conversations with those who are different. Ask God to rid you of any bitterness, prejudice or hurt from the past that could inhibit your ability to hear someone. You are not seeking to engage in small talk, to sell anything or to lecture anyone. It's a productive back-and-forth conversation, where two different people hear and begin to understand one another. This takes time, humility and a growing trust. Ask God to guide you into the right productive conversations AND the courage to walk through the door when He opens one. Ask God to give you patience for trust to build over time.

BE CURIOUS

Reclaiming productive interaction won't occur by talking more but by listening more. Instead of speaking and sharing your thoughts, assumptions or opinions, ask questions. When you ask questions, you are seeking to understand someone different. Ask:

"Help me understand how you came to that conclusion?"
"Why do you...?"

When they are answering, do not cut them off or prepare your answer. Stop assuming you know their thoughts. Stop beginning to build a case against them. Instead say:

"Tell me more."
"Go on."
"What else?"
"Interesting!"
"I never knew that."

Let the person exhaust all of his/her reasons and rationales for why s/he acts or thinks that way. Be known for your curiosity, NOT your opinion, and this will build a foundation of trust.

BE EMPATHETIC

As followers of Christ, we are commanded to love people, not fix them or change them. For the most part, people think and act based on their experiences, which can include upbringing, culture, demographics, generational sin, personal sin, trauma, etc. These experiences do not excuse thoughts or behaviors, but they likely explain them. Be curious enough to understand WHY people think or believe what they do. When possible, empathize with them by putting yourself in their shoes. "If I had that experience, what would I think or believe?" Authentic curiosity coupled with authentic empathy builds trust.

BE SELFLESS

Part of being human is that you want to be understood, too. So you may be seeking a productive conversation with someone hoping s/he will want to understand you. Yet, the command of Christ is for us to love, not to be loved; to make peace, not for peace to be made with us. If someone is not interested in your beliefs, if tensions rise or if the discussion becomes unproductive, respect the other person's boundaries. Productive conversations require a willingness to lay down your agenda or needs and entrust yourself to God. He will reward your selflessness with His presence and peace.

YOUR ASSIGNMENT

1. **Brainstorm:** Make a list of people you have a relationship with who have a different ethnicity, religion, political affiliation or cultural background.
2. **Prepare:** Ask God to open the door for conversations and the courage to walk through it. Tell a friend(s) about your goal and ask them to pray for you.
3. **Practice:** See the first conversation as one of many productive conversations you will have. Like anything that takes practice, you will make missteps along the way, so stay humble. Tell your friend(s) what you are experiencing and learning. Keep asking God to give you more opportunities to be selfless, curious, honest and empathetic toward people who are different than you are.

"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God."
-Jesus of Nazareth, Son of God, Son of Man.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- **"The Art of Listening"** (Simon Sinek)
- **"How to Turn a Conversation Toward Christ"** (Tim Keller, Becky Pippert)
- **"The Art of Active Listening"** (The Harvard Business Review Guide)
- **"The Subtle, Dangerous Path to Christian Extremism"** (Joe Henseler)
- **"We Need a Masterclass in Listening, and Jesus Offers One"** (John Koning)