

Introduction

If you want to increase the quantity and quality of your spiritual conversations, or don't feel competent or confident enough to even begin a spiritual conversation, read on. You'll find practical stories that reveal solid biblical principles for engaging people in spiritual conversations.

If you're looking for a formula, a method, or the latest evangelistic road map, you won't find it here. I've been there and done that! Methods and road maps, while useful for a while, eventually become obsolete as times change. If you want to stay spiritually relevant, then you must focus on that which is eternal. God's timeless truths never change.

Therefore, I'd like you to imagine that you're holding God's GPS in your hand. Regardless of when you pick this book up to read it, or where you live in the world, God's everlasting principles herein will never fail to guide you as you seek to make him known in your relational encounters.

If you want to read little and apply much, if you prefer the practical over the theoretical, I pray you'll find this book to be everything you're looking for. You'll find prayers to offer, books to read, questions to answer, movies and clips to watch, Scriptures to meditate on, quotes to memorize, faith experiments to try, and applications to make. As you use these ideas, you'll begin to make the journey from information to transformation.

So if you're ready to naturally create room—God Space—for spiritual conversations to happen in your everyday life, pour a cup of coffee and start reading. Before long, you'll begin to realize just how hungry people are to talk about God—and how you can help those conversations to happen!

CHAPTER 1

Creating God Space

Paul and Lisa, a young married couple, were heading home to celebrate the holiday season with Lisa's side of the family. Three years earlier, after a rocky first year of marriage, Paul and Lisa had realized they needed something greater than themselves to make their marriage work. They discovered an older married couple who helped them realize that if Jesus were in control of their lives, he could help the two of them become one.

As they grew in their newfound faith, they began to realize that no one else in their entire family believed in Jesus the way they did. Nevertheless, neither Paul nor Lisa felt confident or competent enough to talk about the faith that had turned their lives and marriage around. They had the desire, and they even saw the need, but they didn't know how to bring up their faith in a natural way, so they didn't. However, they were determined to change all that, this Christmas. As they neared their destination, Paul and Lisa's sense of inadequacy and fear of failure drove them into a time of prayer.

If you'd been sitting in the back seat of their car that day, and Paul and Lisa had turned around after their prayer time and asked you for advice on how to bring up the topic of faith, what would you have told them? How do you start a spiritual conversation with family, friends, or co-workers without turning them off?

Keep thinking about this question, for it's a very important one. But for now, let's dive back into our story to find out what Paul and Lisa did.

On Christmas Day, after all the gifts were opened, Paul and Lisa were casually sitting around, catching up with Lisa's younger sister, Karen. Paul and Lisa had heard that Karen was into some kind of New Age religion she had

discovered through friends in college. When Paul and Lisa asked her how things were going, Karen excitedly told them that she was on a spiritual high due to an angel that had recently appeared to her in a dream.

This was the opportunity Paul and Lisa had been looking and praying for. Before Karen even had a chance to share what the angel had told her, Lisa hijacked the conversation. She passionately informed her sister that Scripture says the devil masquerades as the angel of light—that she didn't know what she was messing around with.

Once Lisa had finished her sermonette, she tagged out, and Paul tagged in. He made sure Karen understood that her New Age religion was akin to witchcraft. Paul felt a surge of confidence and power as he pronounced other truths he was convinced Karen needed to hear.

After Paul and Lisa finished double-teaming Karen, the room was filled with an awkward silence. The conversation was over before it ever began. Karen got up and left the room. Paul and Lisa had wounded her so deeply that Karen refused to speak to them the rest of the holiday season. What's more, when Karen told the rest of the family how she had been disrespected, parented, judged, and essentially labeled as a witch, a family verdict was quickly reached. Paul and Lisa were now sentenced to wear the scarlet F (reserved for religious Fanatics) in the family.

Paul and Lisa drove home defeated and discouraged. The very thing they had feared the most had happened. This experience made it easy for them to become a part of the silent majority who keep their faith to themselves.

Karen and the rest of Lisa's family, on the other hand, came to an entirely different conclusion. They decided that the only way to have a safe conversation with a Christian is to make sure you say things you know they'll agree with—otherwise you'll be told why you're wrong and they're right. Rather than risk another awkward outcome, the whole family agreed not to talk about religion around Paul and Lisa again. Paul and Lisa's good intentions produced nothing more than hurt feelings, and a resolve on both sides to leave spiritual conversations alone.

A SAFE PLACE

I often wonder what would happen if—instead of all-too-common occurrences like the one above—the body of Christ could create low-risk, high-grace places for people to pursue their need to have spiritual

conversations. According to Ecclesiastes 3:11, God has given us all an inner drive to know and be known by him. St. Augustine so brilliantly captured this thought when he wrote in his *Confessions*, “Our heart is not quiet until it rests in Thee.” Where does an unquiet heart like Karen’s go these days to safely share this yearning to know and be known by the Creator?

For most Christians, the answer is a no-brainer: It’s the local church, of course! Unfortunately, this is not the word on the street. For many who grew up outside the walls of the church, going to church is a scary proposition.

I was reminded of this recently. I met the owner of a Japanese steakhouse in Fort Collins, Colorado, through a mutual friend. He came over to my friend’s house to play pingpong. We were having such a good time that when he asked me what I did for a living, I did something I rarely do with a stranger: I invited him to come to church with me the next morning. I explained that I had been invited to Fort Collins to preach at a church, and if he wanted to experience firsthand what I do for a living, he was welcome to come join me. In strongly accented English, he quickly replied, “Oh, no, Mr. Doug, I too full of sin.” My heart broke to hear him so eloquently express in broken English what millions have made abundantly clear. The church has become a scary place for people who are “too full of sin.”

RAISING THE BAR—BY LOWERING IT

For many, going to church is as scary as going to a hard-core biker bar might be to Christians. This point became crystal clear to me in Idaho several years ago.

I was invited to do a workshop in a small town north of Boise by several local churches that were trying to figure out how to effectively reach their community. After a couple of hours of teaching on Friday night, I challenged everyone in the audience to head down to the local bar with my wife and me to apply what we’d just learned.

I was shocked by the response. Only one hand was raised. The pastor responsible for arranging my visit knew I wasn’t going to let *him* off the hook, so it was no surprise to see *his* hand. As I probed to understand why these good-hearted people had unanimously declined my offer, they described the bar as a place for carousing, dirty jokes, swearing, drunkenness, smoking... the list went on until the “filthy five,” “nasty nine,” and “dirty dozen” had all been covered.

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After they finished sharing, I said, “It sounds like you’re describing a bar to me. You didn’t expect them to be singing ‘Amazing Grace’ and baptizing people with Bud Light down there, did you? Did Jesus call us to fish from the bank, or to swim with the fish, when he told us to go into all the world?”

My next question set them up: “How many of you would like to see the people at the bar come to church on Sunday morning?” All hands were raised.

I then asked, point-blank, “Who do you think is going to make the first move? If I go down to the bar and make the same invitation to them that I made to you, how many bar hoppers do you think would be willing to leave *their* ‘club’ to join *your* ‘club’ on Sunday morning? What would compel someone to give up what he likes to do most on Sunday morning, borrow a suit and tie, sing songs to somebody he can’t see, listen to someone speak at him for 30 to 45 minutes about someone who lived more than 2,000 years ago, and then pay for the experience with something called an offering? How many takers do you think I’d have?”

I thought my stirring speech would surely move a few people to *be* the church down at the local bar that night, but no one budged. I’m opposed to using guilt and shame as crowbars to move God’s people, so I ended by asking them to pray for their pastor, my wife, and me because we were going for it.

STEPPING OUT

As I walked away from the church, the Holy Spirit prompted me to ask my pastor friend if he had a video camera. I figured that the only way to help this group of Christians become more outwardly focused was to show them what an outward focus might look like.

We walked into the bar 15 minutes later. I introduced myself to a group of four, ranging from 18 to 21 years of age. I explained why I was in town and asked if they’d be willing to answer some questions about their experiences with the church. I encouraged them to keep it real because I’d be showing the video of our conversation the next day at my workshop. More than two hours later, the pastor, my wife, and I headed home from the bar after an exhilarating dialogue.

The flow of the conversation that evening went something like this: For 45 minutes I listened to this group share from their hearts about what had turned them off to church. As I listened, I got in touch with some of the things I had been wondering about, and at the appropriate time, I wondered out loud. These wondering questions (more about this in Chapter 6) stimulated their spiritual curiosity and opened the door for us to talk about spiritual matters. After an hour or so, they felt safe enough to ask their own questions about faith.

By the time our heart-to-heart exchange had ended, they asked me if it's possible to know for sure if they would end up in heaven. I had the privilege of sharing my faith story and the gospel with them. God's message had been hand-delivered to the appropriate spiritual address! (If you want to see for yourself what happened, you'll have to come to one of my workshops sometime. My schedule is posted at GodsGPS.com.)

The next morning, the people in my workshop were blown away by what they saw and heard on the video. God Space had been created in a place they had written off as the devil's playground. All I did was show up, jump on "God's teeter-totter" (more on that in Chapter 7), and let the Spirit lead.

THE FIRST MOVE

Both Christians and non-Christians have very real perceptions about one another that keep us from interacting in redeeming ways. It's been said that the only thing more difficult than getting the church to go to the world is getting the world to come to us. If showing up at each other's club is too scary for so many people, is there a way to create space in our daily interactions that might tear down some of the walls that keep us polarized?

I believe God wants Christians to make the first move. If I had chosen to stay at my club that night rather than head toward their club, nothing would have happened.

I firmly believe that if the American church doesn't grasp the implications of this need for Christians to move out of their comfort zones, 25 years from now we'll find ourselves in the same spiritual state as Europe and Canada. The local church used to be the heart and soul of American communities. Those days are slipping away fast, as church attendance continues to drop year after year nationwide. Today many churches need to face the cold, hard fact that if they closed their doors tomorrow, no one in the community

would miss them. It's as if we've forgotten that the early church in the book of Acts existed primarily for those who were *not* already Christ-followers.

Thom S. Rainer's research, documented in "Seven Sins of Dying Churches," supports this harsh reality. In a survey of churches across the U.S., he found that 95 percent of the ministries within the church are for church members alone. This statistic hit me like a baseball bat. I've had numerous experiences that have confirmed this inwardly focused mentality. The one that stands out best in my mind occurred during one of my workshops.

After I'd asked whether the church's budget reflected the heart of Jesus, one of the church leaders did some quick math to convert what I was saying into the bottom line. He had added the pastors' salaries, church employees' salaries, and all the other costs of keeping the church doors open. Then he'd divided that sum by the number of converts in the church's past year of ministry. He announced that in the past year, it had cost the church \$440,000 per convert. Ouch! Now please understand that "everything that can be counted does not necessarily count; everything that counts cannot necessarily be counted." (We can thank the famous "theologian" Albert Einstein for that insightful quote.) Nevertheless, it's hard to deny that many churches exist primarily to keep their club members happy.

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Rick Warren, author of *The Purpose Driven Life*, is even more piercing: "The church that doesn't want to grow is saying to the world, 'You can go to hell.'" Disturbing, isn't it? Nevertheless, many churches continue to operate essentially as clubs, convinced they'd be letting God down if they closed up shop and sold their buildings.

Don't get me wrong; I care deeply about the church. The bride of Christ is the hope of the world. "Bride bashing" is not my thing. However, I also care deeply about the people God misses the most—those who need a safe space to ask their questions, share their doubts, voice their concerns, and even vent their anger toward God and the church. They need space to bring their real selves out into the light, to journey one step at a time toward the

GOD

cross. If not-yet-Christians are convinced the church is not a safe space to experience community or inquire about their spiritual yearnings, where *is* that space? And what does that look like in a world that increasingly says no to our traditional God Spaces?

START FROM THE HEART

If we're going to create God Space for others, it has to start inside *us*. It takes safe people to create safe places. First Corinthians 6:19 says that when we become Christians, our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit. But Jesus did not send the Holy Spirit to simply *reside in* our bodies but to *preside over* them.

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Unfortunately, we're naturally predisposed toward resisting this holy takeover. *My* space, *my* desires, *my* needs, *my* money, *my* time—this “me, myself, and I” list of entitlements goes on forever. God wants to deliver us from this way of thinking. God Space begins where the natural gives way to the supernatural. We're urged, in Romans 12:1, to offer our bodies as living sacrifices. We can't create God Space until we've allowed God to create space in us first. The following story illustrates this truth.

MY AIRPLANE STORY

For 10 years, I served as ministry director for the Athletes in Action basketball team. During the fall, our team played college-basketball powerhouses like Duke, North Carolina, UCLA, Indiana, and Kentucky. At half-time or right after the game, our team was given the opportunity to share with the crowd how Christ had made a difference in our lives. Our travel schedule was usually horrendous, as we flew from city to city to play these schools before the regular season. Late nights and early mornings were all part of being on the road with AIA.

One particular season, our team played seven games in seven nights. After the sixth game, I was exhausted. The next morning we headed to the airport to catch a 6 o'clock flight. I waited until the very last minute to board so I could occupy a row with no one else in it, stretch out, and catch a nap

before we landed. I found several pillows, pulled down the window shade, stretched out, and began to enjoy the rest that my mind and body needed.

Just then I heard the flight attendant exhort a passenger to hurry because the plane was about to leave. The next thing I knew, the extrovert of all extroverts was asking for her seat on the aisle in the row I was trying to sleep in. I sat up and repositioned myself so she could sit down and I could go back to sleep. However, this was not what God had in mind.

Dianne introduced herself and asked me if I knew which basketball team was on board. I answered her as quickly as possible and lapsed back into a semi-comatose state. Dianne apparently did not have a grasp of the obvious, as she began to pepper me with questions about Athletes in Action. Her barrage of questions was stirring up a civil war within me. I prayed, “Please, God, I want to be off the clock for a while. I do not want to talk with this lady, let alone be your ambassador to her.”

I don’t know about you, but I never seem to wrestle with God and win. God wanted me to create space for him to work in this encounter. It’s taken me a long time to truly understand what Jesus means when he tells us that we must lose daily if we are going to truly win (Luke 9:23). This death to self—*my* space—is where God Space begins to form. This is exactly what happened that day. I eventually gave in and allowed God to have his way in and through me. It didn’t take long before the Holy Spirit began to guide me into Dianne’s life.

I had no idea where the conversation would lead. After five minutes of everyday pleasantries, I learned that Dianne’s passion was art. She excitedly shared her lifelong aspiration to move to Santa Fe and open her own art studio. I wondered aloud what was holding her back. She told me that her husband was not willing to leave Indianapolis, and I replied that it must be difficult to have the two loves of your life diametrically opposed to each other. Immediately she lowered her voice and said, “I’ve never told anyone this before, but I’m seriously considering leaving my husband and my son because I don’t want this dream to go unfulfilled.”

I asked for permission to share something I thought she might find helpful, and she granted it. I told Dianne that when I face major decisions, I like to play out the probabilities of where each decision might eventually lead. I asked her if she’d like to walk through this exercise, and she enthusiastically agreed. After five minutes, she came to the conclusion that choosing art

over family, or family over art, were both less than desirable. She said, “I feel like this is a no-win situation. What do you think I should do?”

Before I tell you what I told her, let’s replay this scene, dissecting it as we go.

I boarded the plane consumed by my agenda. The Holy Spirit wrestled with me to let go and to be open to God’s agenda for the duration of the flight. I eventually gave in. This death to self is *always* a prerequisite for creating God Space. Now that God had his way in me, he could also have his way in my conversation with Dianne. Spirit-led listening and wondering create safe places for people to bring their real selves into the light. When they do, they usually reveal a specific need that requires a divine solution.

Let’s get back to the conversation. I responded to Dianne’s question with the following “spiritual appetizer” (more on this in Chapter 8). I said, “When life’s problems exceed my finite resources, I like to talk to someone with infinite resources. All I can tell you, Dianne, is that when I pray, ‘coincidences’ seem to happen.”

Dianne immediately consumed my spiritual snack. Instantly the lights came on as she recalled a time in her life when she talked to God regularly. She said, “Those were the happiest days of my life.” Dianne’s heart immediately opened up, so I asked her if she’d be interested in looking at what the Bible has to say about seeking God for direction. Again, she was eager to hear. We spent the remainder of the flight using the Bible as the focal point for our “divine dialogue” (Chapter 9 develops that idea).

Have you ever stopped to wonder why these stories always seem to happen on airplanes? Every Christian speaker and leader I know seems to have an airplane story. I think it’s because on an airplane, your spirituality has no bearing on where you sit or whom you sit next to. God uses this to bring Christians and non-Christians together as fellow sojourners heading in the same direction. Common ground, close proximity, no cell phones, and the belief that you will never again see the people you are sitting next to create greater possibilities for the natural and the supernatural to collide in meaningful ways.

SOMEONE ELSE’S AIRPLANE STORY

The following happened to a man I deeply respect because he creates God Space everywhere he goes. His name is Harvey, and here’s his story—retold in

my words, with my interjections—to highlight what he did to create God Space.

Harvey was on a flight to Zurich, Switzerland, and was seated next to a woman from India named Badhra. Early in the flight, he discovered that she was living and working in the U.S. as a doctor, and was traveling to Mumbai to visit family. As they continued to talk, Harvey asked Badhra if she was of the Hindu faith. She said, “No, I am a Jainist, which is similar.”

Harvey responded, “That’s very interesting. I have not heard about Jainism. Would you mind telling me about your faith?” (*The conversation had reached this point because Harvey had taken a sincere interest in what mattered most to Badhra.*)

As she described Jainism, Harvey asked clarifying questions to better understand her faith. (*Harvey entered the conversation in humility, as a listener and a learner, seeking to understand before seeking to be understood.*)

Toward the end of their conversation, Harvey said, “I have found that most faiths have some hope attached to them to motivate people’s involvement. Tell me: What does the Jainist hope in?” (*Harvey continued to explore her worldview by raising sincere questions that he was wondering about.*)

She paused and then answered, “There is no hope in Jainism.” (*Knowing he had about 10 hours with Badhra, Harvey chose to say nothing about Christianity. Yet, He wisely chose instead to prayerfully wait on the Lord. Badhra may have been expecting an agenda from Harvey, but as she continued to experience space to go at her own pace, she developed trust.*)

Shortly after this conversation, their meals came, and they casually chatted as they ate. Afterward, Harvey read for a while. Later, Badhra turned to him and asked, “Am I right in assuming that you are a Christian?”

Harvey replied, “Yes, I am.”

“Oh, I have always wanted to know what it means to be a Christian. Would you mind telling me?”

Harvey did not hesitate to share the gospel with her. He wisely emphasized the hope that Christians have because of Jesus’ claims. (*Harvey cued into the lack of hope Badhra described in Jainism.*) Badhra listened carefully, asked thoughtful questions, and thanked Harvey profusely when he’d finished.

Later on in the flight, Badhra began talking to the man on the other side of her, Akmed, who was from Iran. Suddenly she turned to Harvey and said, “I have just been talking to Akmed, and I think you would enjoy our conversation. Akmed is a Muslim, and I have told him that you are a Christian and

I am a Jainist. He would like to hear more about Christianity—would you mind telling him what you told me?”

Harvey said he would be happy to, but suggested there might be a better way. “How about if I listen while you tell Akmed what you heard me say, and I’ll add or correct anything after you’ve finished? *(Harvey wisely asked Badhra to express what he had shared with her, so Badhra could internalize what she’d learned and deepen its impression upon her.)*

“Ah, very good,” Badhra said, and seemed delighted as she shared with Akmed. “How did I do?” she asked afterward. Harvey assured her that she had presented the gospel perfectly. This led to a stimulating spiritual conversation that lasted for several hours. *(Harvey intentionally created room by creating a safe place for these two people to do what we are all taught not to do: talk about religion. He didn’t make them go there; he created room for the possibility.)*

Though neither Badhra nor Akmed made a decision to become a Christian during the flight, Harvey was certain that they both now understood the gospel and the differences between Christianity and their own religions by the time they landed in Zurich. Now *that’s* an airplane story!

Here’s the million-dollar question: How do we *naturally* create room for spiritual conversations like that in our everyday lives? Surely God doesn’t intend for us to wait until our next ride on an airplane!

The following chapters are intended to answer this question by giving you one piece of the puzzle at a time. I hope that by the time you’ve finished this book, your confidence and competence will be stretched to the point that you’ll have your own stories to share.

So let’s begin with a broad working definition of God Space.

DEFINING GOD SPACE

God Space is where...

...God is felt and encountered in tangible ways that address the longings and cries of the heart.

...we come to the end of our own finite resources and experience the infinite resources of God.

...the natural gives way to the supernatural.

...seeds of faith are planted, watered, and nurtured.

...gentleness and respect are present, judgment is absent, and divine dialogue flows naturally because trust has been established.

...the invisible principles of God's kingdom are made visible in ways people can see, touch, and feel.

...friends of sinners—in other words, *our* friends—dwell.

...the topic of God can be explored freely without agendas, biases, and personal convictions getting in the way.

...cynics, skeptics, scoffers, and spiritually curious people alike can raise their questions, share their doubts, voice their concerns, and even vent their anger toward God and the church.

...the “unworthy” feel safe enough to bring their real selves out into the light, and to journey, one step at a time, toward the magnetic pull they sense deep in their souls.

...spiritual curiosity is aroused, and the message of Christianity becomes plausible.

From **INFORMATION** *to* **TRANSFORMATION**

This book is meant to be experienced, not merely read. Therefore, each chapter concludes with practical assignments, so you can begin *having* those experiences. If you approach these ideas with a teachable heart, the definitions of God Space that you've just read will, more and more, become your reality.

Jesus was called many things during his short time here on earth. My favorite title for him is found in Matthew 11:19 and Luke 7:34 where Jesus acknowledges his awareness of the fact that many were calling him “a friend of sinners.” In my mind, no title gets at the heart of why Jesus came to earth more than this one. It so closely coincides with his mission stated in Luke 19:10: “For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost.”

If we're going to make God's “invisible kingdom” become visible, then Christ's heart needs to be formed in us. Prayerfully ponder the following questions that reflect the essence of God Space. Grade yourself by using the following scale for each question. Jot down a number at the end of each question. When you have finished, add your numbers together to assess where you are in your journey.

GOD

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
NEVER				SOMETIMES					ALWAYS

1. Can you overlook un-Christlike attitudes and lifestyles in your efforts to connect with others?
2. Are you able to suspend your judgment for long periods of time around not-yet-Christians?
3. Do you consistently seek to understand the not-yet-Christians you know before seeking to be understood by them?
4. Are you patient enough to wait for the not-yet-Christians in your life to ask for your opinion?
5. Be honest: Do you *like* people who are far from God?
6. Do people who are far from God like *you*? For example: Are you invited to “party-parties”?
7. Does your body language communicate an open-hearted acceptance of the not-yet-Christians in your life?
8. Are you able to communicate acceptance to not-yet-Christians without endorsing their lifestyles?
9. In your relationships with not-yet-Christians, do you typically offer kindness rather than “rightness”?
10. Is your heart consistently broken and filled with compassion for the not-yet-Christians in your life?

85 to 100—Congratulations! You might be frequently misunderstood by Christians, but the not-yet-Christians in your life are undoubtedly drawn toward the heart of Jesus formed in you. Keeping walking in this light.

65 to 85—You must decrease, and Jesus must increase—one heart attitude at a time. Embrace the people and the situations in your life as God attempts to prune those heart attitudes that are not bearing fruit for his kingdom.

Under 65—Jesus needs to do something *in* you before he can do something *through* you. Consider spending less time doing religious activities, and more time asking God to do the soul surgery needed to form the heart of Jesus in you.

CHAPTER 2

Spiritual Conversation-Killers

In April 2003, National Public Radio aired a story about a standoff in Najaf, Iraq, between an angry mob of Shiites and a heavily armored patrol from the American 101st Airborne Division. Fearing that the soldiers were preparing to desecrate their holy shrine, hundreds of unarmed civilians pressed in toward the soldiers, waving their hands and shouting defiantly. Although the patrol's intentions were peaceful, the standoff would probably have been disastrous if not for the quick thinking of U.S. Lieutenant Colonel Christopher Hughes.

Hughes, who was in command that day, picked up a loudspeaker and barked out three simple commands to his troops. First, he told them to "take a knee"; second, to point their weapons toward the ground; and finally, to look up and give everyone in the hostile crowd a friendly smile. Astoundingly, in a few moments after they obeyed his order, the troops saw the demeanor of the crowd change. Hostility and defiance melted away, as smiles and friendly pats on the back replaced shaking fists and screaming voices.

Though it may not be immediately apparent, this story has important implications for spiritual conversations in a world that is becoming increasingly hostile to the traditional kinds of conversations Christians attempt to have. As author Ravi Zacharias says, "We must learn to find the back door to people's hearts because the front door is heavily guarded." Much like the Shiites that Lieutenant Colonel Hughes dealt with, many people we hope to reach for Jesus react defensively. They anticipate, and are amply prepared for, any direct attack on the holy places and sacred shrines of their hearts.

Our message rarely gets through because what they hear is “My worldview is better than your worldview, so let me tell you why I’m right and you’re wrong.” Instead of opening hearts to Jesus, many times we merely perpetuate the “us versus them” standoff. So how do we keep from becoming entangled in these no-win, never-ending quagmires?

a
SCRIPTURE
 to meditate
 on

The Message version of Colossians 4:5-6 puts the answer this way: “Use your heads as you live and work among outsiders. Don’t miss a trick. Make the most of every opportunity. Be gracious in your speech. The goal is to bring out the best in others in a conversation, not put them down, not cut them out.”

The first sentence of this passage perfectly describes Lt. Col. Hughes’ approach that day in Najaf. He was *wise* in the way he related to people whose feelings and beliefs were so different from his. We must be equally wise if we want the quality and quantity of our spiritual conversations to increase. If you truly believe, as I do, that real wisdom comes from God, I encourage you to pause and invite the Holy Spirit to grant you this kind of wisdom as you read this book.

a
PRAYER
 to offer

“God, open my eyes to the ways I may be hindering opportunities for spiritual conversations in my daily life.”

I’ve found that God usually wants to do something *in* us before he can do something *through* us. He wants us to be transformed into the very message we are trying to share with others. That’s why I strongly encourage you to do all the homework assignments in this chapter; if you don’t, the rest of this book could be a wasted read. Identifying and eliminating the spiritual conversation-killers in your life is a pivotal part of each Christ-follower’s journey toward internalizing the truth of Colossians 4:5-6.

Allow the Holy Spirit to have his way in your heart as you reflect on my top-10 list of spiritual conversation-killers. I’m all too familiar with each one of them. You see, I *failed* my way into writing this chapter, one spiritual conversation-killer at a time. So by all means, learn from my failures so you can avoid my mistakes.

Killer 1: AN UNBELIEVING HEART

After speaking with countless Christ-followers all over the world, I’m convinced that the number-one killer of spiritual conversation is unbelief. Please stop and prayerfully consider a question that penetrates to the heart of this conviction: *Do you really believe the people in your Monday-through-*

Saturday world want to talk about spiritual things? If you don't, I urge you to stop reading right now and invite Christ to help you with your unbelieving heart. Nothing else in this book will help you until you change your mind about this matter.

In Matthew 12:34b, Jesus tells us that our words reflect our hearts. I have found that we will miss opportunity after opportunity if we've decided that the people who cross our paths have no interest in talking about spiritual matters. For those of you who are skeptical of my assertion due to the spiritual climate of your geographic location, please give me the benefit of the doubt. I've had spiritual conversations with people all over the world, including the supposed "tough places." I think it's because the Holy Spirit has given me a conviction that if God has put eternity in every person's heart, which is what Ecclesiastes 3:11 tells us, then *all* people were made for spiritual conversations.

As I've learned how to naturally create God Space and avoid the next nine spiritual conversation-killers you will read about, spiritual conversations have become the norm, not the exception. Thomas Jefferson said that "when the heart is right, the feet are swift." Jesus said, "Everything is possible for him who believes" (Mark 9:23b). Your heart is the heart of the matter! Unbelief hampers the Holy Spirit's ability to advance God's kingdom through you, one spiritual conversation at a time.

Killer 2: PRE-CONVERSATION HISTORY

The second greatest deterrent to spiritual conversations occurs before most conversations even get started. In his book *UnChristian*, David Kinman quotes one outsider who described Christians this way: "Most people I meet assume that *Christian* means very conservative, entrenched in their thinking, anti-gay, anti-choice, angry, violent, illogical, empire builders; they want to convert everyone, and they generally cannot live peacefully with anyone who doesn't believe what they believe." Like it or not, our Christian jewelry, T-shirts, TV programs, tracts, and bumper stickers all serve to create a pre-conversation history that colors the perception of everyone we meet. This greatly inhibits the possibility of having spiritual conversations. When you identify with Jesus, you automatically inherit all the perceptions created by his followers. Getting out of this "Christian box" as quickly as possible is essential if you're going to have real conversations.

This became quite clear to me on a trip to Columbus, Ohio. I was

speaking at the annual Summer Institute at Xenos, a church that is trying to live out many of the principles of this book. I was having a problem with one of the digital slides in my keynote presentation, so I went to the nearby computer store for help. The young lady assigned to work with me liked the challenging problem I presented to her. As she attempted to fix it, she was exposed to most of the content of my presentation. I sensed tension as she asked me to scroll through the clips and slides. At that moment, I realized that I wasn't just *in* the box—to her, I *was* the box.

Fortunately, the Holy Spirit helped get me out of the box with the following question: “I’m wondering if you would be willing to help me in another way. I’m here in town to speak to a large gathering of Christians who would like to learn how to talk to their friends about spiritual matters. Has anyone ever tried to do that with you?” She immediately ranted about her negative experiences with her Christian sister. As I began to reflectively listen to her, she began to calm down a little.

I asked, “If your sister were in the audience tomorrow, what would you like me to tell her so that your future conversations turn out a little better?” With that question, I had climbed out of the box. She began to realize that I was not like her sister. Now that her history was out on the table, I was able to move forward and avoid the landmines that might blow up our discussion about spiritual matters.

I left, wishing there *were* a way her sister could be in my audience the next day. Of course, that didn't happen. I decided to share this story in the hope that someday she'll read this book and connect the dots. Whether she does or not, this experience helped me see that we can't ignore people's pre-conversation histories if we hope to increase the quality and quantity of our spiritual conversations.

This leads us to a far more personal question: What if *you're* the one who's contributed to someone's negative perception of Christianity? This question cuts deep into the core of all our relationships, and Jesus may have had it in mind when he said that we “will have to give account on the day of judgment for every careless word [we] have spoken” (Matthew 12:36).

Careless words erode our credibility. Have you ever found yourself wanting to talk to somebody about spiritual things, but didn't because you were afraid the word *hypocrite* might be thrown in your direction? I'm convinced that, next to unbelief, this fear muzzles more Christians than any other factor.

This was made apparent to me one day while I was sharing some of these

thoughts with a group of women who met regularly in a neighborhood Bible study. Carol explained that she frequently spent time with a group of non-Christian women. Every time they got together, these women bashed their husbands. Carol had the courage to admit to me that all too often, she joined right in. How could she now turn around and talk about God's design for marriage, or anything else concerning Christianity, without inviting scathing comments?

Only God knows how many of us might be two confessions away from the most significant spiritual conversations of our lives.

Have you been there and done that? I have, and I know only one way to rectify the situation. It starts and ends with confession. Start with God by agreeing with him that the things you said did not reflect positively on him. Then humble yourself before those you said them to, and let those people know you were wrong to say the things you did. And rest assured: When you own your mistakes and call them what they are, spiritual conversations come. Only God knows how many of us might be two confessions away from the most significant spiritual conversations of our lives. (You'll discover more about how to rebuild burned bridges in Chapter 10.)

Killer 3: AWKWARD TRANSITIONS

Several years ago, I found myself at home alone on a Sunday afternoon, immersed in the last two minutes of a football game that would decide which team would go to the playoffs. I was annoyed when the doorbell rang. I prepared to stiff-arm (in Christian love, of course) whoever was at the door so I could get back to my football fix. When I opened the door, two Mormons stood ready to engage me in spiritual conversation.

I found myself suspended in a time warp, as they fumbled the ball early and often in their struggle to start a conversation with me. As I listened to their awkward attempts, images of bygone days flashed through my mind. I remembered times when I was the one trying to start such conversations, and I was filled with compassion for these two Mormons as I recalled stammering through awkward transitions I had memorized early on as a Christ-follower.

Awkward transitions create awkward feelings, which leave people feeling pretty uptight. Most of the people I know don't regularly sign up for conversations that leave them feeling weirded out.

This raises a question I'm asked quite often: "How do you transition into a spiritual conversation?" As I've probed to better understand this question, I've discovered that most Christ-followers are looking for a sure-fire transitional statement they can memorize that will produce great spiritual conversations every time they use it.

Maybe we should take a cue from Jesus on this one. If he didn't approach spiritual conversations this way, why should we?

I'm quite familiar with the transitions Christian workers are taught to use. Even when practiced and delivered flawlessly, these transitions tend to create awkward feelings when people realize you're trying to take the conversation somewhere. If their hearts aren't prepared to go there, it might be the last spiritual conversation you'll ever have with them. In Chapter 7, I'll discuss how we can avoid awkward transitions and move naturally into spiritual conversations.

Killer 4: OUR LANGUAGE, NOT THEIRS

While I'm on the subject of Mormons, I have to share a funny story that I hope will make Killer 4 seem quite obvious. A few years ago, my brother's job required him to move to Salt Lake City. After the family had settled into the neighborhood, one of the neighbors came over to welcome them. As this woman began to engage my sister-in-law in conversation, she asked, "Are you LDS [Latter-Day Saints]?" My sister-in-law looked at my brother and replied, "Well, neither one of us is ADD [Attention Deficit Disorder], so we probably aren't LDS either."

I still laugh when I recall this story. However, when I think about its implications for spiritual conversations, I'm quite sobered. When we lead with questions such as "Are you saved?" or "Have you been born again?" people feel like outsiders. When we speak "Christianese," we are unwittingly saying, "If you want to have a spiritual conversation with me, you'll have to do so on my terms."

Jesus modeled something quite different. He used the language of the day to speak of heavenly truths. The Apostle Paul asked believers to pray that he would proclaim the message clearly (Colossians 4:4). When we use our language rather than theirs, we confuse people and often leave them feeling confused or stupid. Jesus used language that built bridges and opened doors. We can do the same by learning to translate spiritual truth into the everyday vernacular of the people we converse with.

Killer 5: DISRESPECT

Sometimes I think my “spiritual gift” is being quick to speak and slow to listen. James 1:19 tells us to do the opposite. If we aren’t quick to listen and slow to speak, it will be quite easy for others to feel disrespected.

There are lots of other ways to unknowingly demonstrate disrespect in our conversations. Being condescending or “parental” will do it every time. When we exceed the speed limit, run the stop signs, or hijack the conversation (the three most common “evangelistic misdemeanors,” which I’ll describe in detail in Chapter 5), we are not treating others the way we would like to be treated. Personally, I don’t regularly show up for conversations in which I know I’m going to be disrespected.

Killer 6: AGENDAS

In the movie *The Big Kahuna*, Larry asks Bob (an evangelical Christian) how he ended up talking to Dick Fuller (a prospective business client) about religion. As Larry continues to probe, Bob eventually admits that the conversation got started due to a question he asked to steer the conversation toward spiritual matters. Larry astutely observes that Bob was looking for the opportunity to talk about what he believed. He goes on to say, “The conversation was not allowed to have a natural course because somebody was at the helm directing it.”

Later in the movie, Phil—another salesman—pulls Bob aside and shares this advice with him: “If you want to talk to somebody honestly, as a human being, ask him about his kids, find out what his dreams are—just to find out, for no other reason. Because as soon as you lay your hands on a conversation to steer it, it’s not a conversation anymore; it’s a pitch. And you’re not a human being; you’re a marketing rep.”

After watching this movie, I realized that Larry and Phil had some advice for me as well as Bob. During my early years in ministry, I became known as one of the chief marketing reps for Jesus. Unfortunately, I was actually affirmed for steering conversations toward my sales pitch for Jesus. *Spiritual conversations should be our ultimate motive, not our ulterior motive.*

If people are ready for the agenda you have in mind for the conversation, you’ll be warmly embraced. If they aren’t, you’ll be assigned a label that will kill most of your opportunities for spiritual conversations in the future.

← a
MOVIE
to watch

← a
QUOTE
to
memorize

Killer 7: CONTROL

How long does it usually take for you to seize a conversation and dominate it with your worldview? This is a question I wish someone had challenged me to think about early in my spiritual journey. During the 1980s, I started the Athletes in Action ministry at the University of Tennessee. If you had dropped in on one of my appointments with an athlete back then, this is what you probably would have seen: I'd usually begin by asking a couple of questions to break the ice. I rarely listened to the answers because I didn't want to detour from the destination I had planned for the conversation. After I broke the ice, I usually asked a question I had memorized to turn the conversation toward spiritual things. I spent the rest of the hour sharing something I believed the other person needed to hear. From beginning to end, I was in control of the conversation.

How long does it usually take for you to seize a conversation and dominate it with your worldview?

Other ministries are even more extreme. They teach their workers to treat questions as smokescreens. Each question is deflected so the Christian worker can get back to his or her scripted presentation. Is it any wonder more and more people are saying "no thanks" to these conversations? If you want to have a meaningful spiritual conversation, you'll need to give up the idea of controlling it.

I'm convinced that many Christ-followers are afraid to be in settings where they're not in control of the conversation. This is why churches and ministries die. When we insist on having conversations where only our fans are present, only when we choose to, and only during activities we're comfortable with, we might as well start digging a 6-foot hole and playing taps. It's only a matter of time before a church or ministry that insists on playing only "home games" begins to fade into oblivion.

Jesus told his disciples not to worry about what to say or how to say it because the Holy Spirit would give them what they needed when they needed it (Matthew 10:19-20). There's nothing packaged or scripted about that—just an admonition to submit to the Holy Spirit's guidance, and the promise that the Spirit will be there when we do.

Recently, as I was leaving a social gathering attended by very few churchgoers, I overheard a pastor say, "If you'd like to talk again sometime,

you know where to find me on Sunday mornings.” I’m not sure what the pastor intended by this parting comment, but I thought about how different the outcome might be if the pastor was as willing to play as many road games as he was home games.

Killer 8: JUDGMENT

To many people in our culture, Christians are considered the “disagreement people.” We’ve worked hard to earn this label, one reaction at a time. Our body language, tone of voice, and verbal responses are dead giveaways to the reality that we disagree with much of what people in our culture are saying and doing. When we become self-designated spiritual umpires, calling balls and strikes on the culture by writing letters to the editor, calling in to talk radio shows, and staging boycotts of one kind or another, our reactions speak for themselves.

Essentially, we are sending the culture this message: Not only do we not endorse your *point of view*, we also don’t accept *you*. This lack of acceptance crushes opportunities for spiritual conversations. *Acceptance* does not mean *endorsement*. When we confuse the two, we destroy the very space God wants to work in.

Many times, not-yet-Christians will say or do things just to see how we’ll react. This is often a test to determine whether it’s safe enough for them to engage with us in real conversations. Reacting to things we hear or see comes naturally for most of us. But what we need are *supernatural* responses—“love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control” (Galatians 5:22-23)—that communicate radical acceptance, if we hope to create space for spiritual conversations to happen naturally.

Acceptance does not mean endorsement. When we confuse the two, we destroy the very space God wants to work in.

Killer 9: COMBATIVENESS

It’s exhilarating to watch two good tennis players volley back and forth. Each tries to cause the other to get out of position in order to hit a decisive shot—a winner—and score a point. Unfortunately, I used to view spiritual conversations in the same way. I viewed the person I was talking with as my opponent who must be won to my Christian point of view.

I interned with Josh McDowell. I was trained by the best when it comes to apologetics. On many occasions, I started my conversations with an overpowering serve. I then prepared myself to pepper winners at my opponent, who in many cases had walked away from the conversation the moment the contest began.

Even if my opponent was up for it, most of the time these worldview challenges led to heated debates, and heated debates eventually gave way to arguments. In the end, I never argued anyone into the kingdom of God. As I once heard Dallas Willard say, “It’s very difficult to be right about something without hurting someone with it.” We need to remember that not-yet-Christians are not the enemy; they’re *victims of the enemy*. We’re called to move into culture with compassion and check our “onward, Christian soldiers” mind-sets at the door.

Killer 10: “IT’S ALL ABOUT ME”

Have you ever been in a conversation in which you felt you couldn’t get a word in edgewise, or the spotlight never seemed to shift off the person who was talking? If so, I bet you just can’t wait for your next conversation with that person!

We need to remember that not-yet-Christians are not the enemy; they’re victims of the enemy. We are called to move into culture with compassion and check our “onward, Christian soldiers” mind-sets at the door.

I believe that Christians can slip into these “it’s all about me” kinds of conversations naturally. Because we’re convinced we have the absolute truth, we believe that what we think is all that really matters. This kind of thinking quickly turns conversations into monologues in which we end up talking to ourselves. We need to realize that if people aren’t asking us what we believe, we might be wiser to keep the spotlight on what *they* believe and think. The secret to *being interesting* in a conversation is to *be interested*. Philippians 2:4 encourages us to “look not only to [our] own interests, but also to the interests of others.”

At the end of the day, I want people to follow Jesus. I want to keep the spotlight on him and what he said, not on what I personally think or believe.

This requires me to bring the Bible into conversations. We'll get into this more in Chapter 9.

BEGIN AGAIN

Just one of these conversation-killers can close down your opportunities for spiritual conversation in a relationship for a lifetime. The good news is that failure is usually never fatal or final; it's just an opportunity to begin again more intelligently. Chapter 10 will give you some practical ideas for reclaiming missed opportunities. I urge you to take these ideas seriously, and to prayerfully consider how to implement them.

Lieutenant Colonel Hughes saved the day when he acted wisely toward people whose values were different from his. Let's follow his example. Let's "take a knee" (a position of humility, from which we approach conversations as listeners and learners); let's point our guns to the ground (back away from confrontational attempts to overpower people with dogmatic certainties that leave others defensive and convinced of our arrogance); let's look up and smile (communicate that we are respectful, warm, friendly, and caring people).

I wonder what would happen if we were willing to let go of the attitudes and practices that kill the potential for spiritual conversations. I'd like to think that Lt. Col. Hughes would recommend the rest of this book as a field manual for a different kind of Christian soldier for today's world.

From **INFORMATION** to **TRANSFORMATION**

UnChristian by David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons (Baker Books, 2007)

← a **BOOK**
to read

As you read through the top-10 list of spiritual conversation-killers, what did the Holy Spirit bring to mind? What might be impeding the quality and quantity of spiritual conversations in your life?

← a **QUESTION**
to answer

Ask the not-yet-Christians in your life to describe what they experience when conversations turn to spiritual matters. Seek to understand their feelings by probing into what prompts them to feel that way.

← a **FAITH EXPERIMENT**
to try