



Coffee Shop Conversations

*Making the Most
of Spiritual Small Talk*



Dale Fincher
—
Jonalyn Fincher

This is helpful, thoughtful, culturally savvy guidance for spiritual conversations. Read it and learn.

John Ortberg, author and pastor,
Menlo Park Presbyterian Church

Coffee Shop Conversations is refreshing, bold, and engaging. Dale and Jonalyn have done a wonderful job of highlighting the importance of genuinely engaging people in meaningful spiritual conversations in the manner and spirit of Jesus.

Sean McDowell, speaker, educator, and author of
Apologetics for a New Generation

Coffee Shop Conversations is really not a book about talking. It's a compilation of personal stories that demonstrates how to listen to non-Christians with empathy. It's a timely book for evangelicals, one that shows us how to love without compromising truth and holiness.

Sarah Sumner, PhD, dean,
A. W. Tozer Theological Seminary

Read *Coffee Shop Conversations* if you want to engage in interesting, provocative dialogue about your faith and journey. The Finchers are bright, thoughtful, and great conversationalists. The evidence is in story after story of fascinating encounters with all kinds of people, and they handle them with grace and truth.

Dick Staub, host of *The Kindlings Muse* and
author of *The Culturally Savvy Christian*

No message is more important than this: the God of the universe knows all about you, and he loves you and forgives you. Every person touched by that good news should want to share it with others. Why don't they? Sometimes, it's simply this: nobody has coached them how to do it in a natural and unpretentious way. *Coffee Shop Conversations* provides a way for all Christians to make the gospel clear and accessible to everyone. The Finchers' style of evangelism is both self-aware and empathetic. I highly

recommend this book for all who take Jesus' command to make disciples seriously. I will be using this book in my evangelism courses.

Jerry Root, PhD, associate professor of Evangelism
and Leadership at Wheaton College

My roommate is quite openly gay and quite openly confused about religion in general. We've had many great discussions, but some of the points from chapter 3—the conversation stoppers—spoke so well to what we talk about. The combination of personal experience and theological background is so helpful for me for our future conversations! This book is applicable to such a wide spectrum of people because, despite the fact that religion is one of those “no-go” conversation topics, it is very much talked about. This [book] offers people the skills to make a spiritual conversation a little easier, and hopefully less offensive, harsh, and heated, but more informational and caring.

Ally Packer, Peace Corps worker

Coffee Shop Conversations completely changed my viewpoint and helped so much with discussions about God. I have a friend who is having challenges with her abusive ex-husband and doubting her beliefs. We have had some beautiful and open discussions thanks to knowledge gained from reading this new book!

Laura Brock, homeschooler,
Steamboat Springs, Colorado

Coffee Shop Conversations helps us talk about the REAL Jesus.

Jon Hale, nurse, Seattle, Washington

Coffee Shop Conversations has given me courage and confidence that I have something really worth sharing. It's spoken to me on my present personal journey to love people in my life that I have been pushing away.

Ellyn Myller, administrative assistant,
Steamboat Springs, Colorado

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Introduction

Humble Confidence

You know what’s really unattractive about Christians?” our artist friend Jeff once said to us. “They’re always on a mission. Too many Christians think they have nothing to gain from others except to get them saved. I don’t like it when *anyone* has an agenda and is not visiting with me straight up. Why can’t they stop, pay attention, and listen?”

We’ve asked ourselves the same thing. Author Anne Lamott writes in her spiritual memoir, *Traveling Mercies*, “Most Christians seem almost hostile in their belief that they are saved and you aren’t.”¹

In his letter to the church in Colossae, Paul taught to be wise in the way we act toward those who believe differently from us, to make the most of every opportunity by conversing in ways full of grace.^a When we moved to a small house in the woods, we noticed how the chipmunks scurried out on a mission, only to hurry back to their hole. Chipmunks remind us of the way we used to approach evangelism, treating people as mission projects, scurrying out to them only to

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^a Colossians 4:5–6.

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hurry back to the safety of our den. This is *not* making the most of every opportunity.

For several years, we've been growing into a new way of conversing that is helping us listen without scurrying away. Every person, we believe, has something to teach us about life. While we believe Jesus distinguishes himself as the Savior and King of us all, while we obey his teachings because we believe they give us the best road map for life, we also believe the biblical idea that all humans—be they Christians, Buddhists, Mormons, atheists—are made in God's image.^b All humans reflect God in varying degrees of clarity. Therefore we approach every conversation as fellow learners rather than posturing as experts. We can gather data and truth even from those who do not follow Jesus, growing in wisdom and love, and giving others dignity by assuming they are doing

the same. If we want our conversations to always be full of grace, then humility, not deft arguments or clever words, must become our first concern.

Many biblical men and women listened and loved others without compromising their friendship with the God of Israel.

Jesus struck up conversations with humility. When he spoke

with a pagan outcast—the Syro-Phoenician woman—he was open to her interruption and even let her challenge his theology.^c Paul did too. He mingled in the marketplace, which informed his speech on Mars Hill. He talked about the Creator and Judge and listened for hours to pagan responses.^d Abraham's servant shared in such a respectful way that he won his pagan listeners over without ever insulting their religion.^e Esther saved the Jewish nation by submitting to the cultural rules even as she questioned the law of the pagan king.^f Many biblical men and women listened and loved others without compromising their friendship with the God of Israel. They humbly listened to those who crossed their path

^b Gen. 1:27. ^c Mark 7:24–30 MSG. ^d Acts 17:16–22. ^e Genesis 24:12–51. ^f Esther 7:4; see also Esther 4:12–5:8; 7:1–4; and 8:16.

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because they knew that even a capricious prophet riding a talking donkey might have something to teach them about their God.[§]

We realize it is risky to allow others to influence us, especially if they do not recognize the Scripture as God's truth or follow his laws. But God promises that if we anchor ourselves to the truth and love of God, we remain free to listen and love without danger of walking astray. The Lord is our shepherd who protects us. In 2 Timothy, Paul wants the young leader to understand, "The Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love and self-discipline." In the same passage Paul writes, "I know whom I have believed, and am convinced that he is able to guard what I have entrusted to him until that day."[¶] He will guard our souls as we lovingly listen and navigate different views of spirituality today, from yoga to goddess worship.

A healthy spirituality always draws us to the person of God, but this doesn't mean we close our ears to learning. As we develop a view of the universe and our human place in it, we remain grounded by putting Jesus at the center. After challenging conversations we regularly revisit Jesus' way of seeing things. Why did Jesus want people to know the Father? What is Jesus' view of creation-care? Does Jesus care about emotional health? How would he respond to evangelists knocking at our door? Who would he have time for? Who would elicit his judgment? His mercy? How would he act in marriage? How would Jesus raise children or love his in-laws?

As we converse with those who claim other forms of spirituality, we must be grounded enough in our own to show them a shining alternative. Spirituality is not merely about meditation, morning Bible reading, or church attendance. A truly spiritual person

A truly spiritual person cultivates a life of love. A Christian spiritual person will know the love of Jesus and his point of view.

[§] Numbers 22. [¶] 2 Timothy 1:7 and 11.

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cultivates a life of love. A Christian spiritual person will know the love of Jesus and his point of view.

With the aid of Jesus, we want to season our conversations with open-hearted grace. The goal of this book is to help us make friends for the journey and to talk with humble confidence about God without sounding pushy or feeling befuddled, infusing even the briefest interaction with meaning.

Small talk might seem straightforward, but not every topic will be easy—either to discuss in these pages or to practice in daily conversation. We want to help you understand why certain topics distract our friends from ever discovering why we love Jesus—topics like evolution, hypocrisy, hell, and homosexuality. We'll get a clearer view of the mountains we see as molehills and vice versa. Feel free to jump to chapters that catch your interest, but keep in mind that every chapter is loaded with perspectives and tools that have dramatically helped us make the most of our spiritual small talk.

We hope our experiences of conversation with friends inspire you to try out a more refreshing way to talk about spirituality. Our prayer is for you to grow wiser and more humble, to give good news, and to spread the friendship of Jesus and the love of God.



Part I

*Making Spiritual
Small Talk*

What Is My Neighbor?

We both grew up in a tradition keen on evangelizing. Following a grandparent's example, I (Jonalyn) applied a litmus test question for all my new friends. "If you were to die tonight, do you know where you'd go?" I read soul-winning guidelines and tracts that promised to get people saved without them suspecting a thing. I proselytized out of fear for my friends' eternal destiny. On the surface I was successful: many of my friends converted.

I (Dale) also used similar tactics explained by my Christian school teachers. Layered on top of my concern that my friends were headed to hell, I was motivated by guilt. If I didn't share immediately and directly, I would disappoint God and miss my sole purpose as a young Christian. I spent most of my formative years in Christian culture riddled by a feeling of failure.

We've come to wonder how many of our friends, when "conversions" did happen, prayed the sinner's prayer to soothe our evangelical fervor. Rarely did we witness a truly changed person. For most, even after the appropriate prayer and the congratulations of an elated youth group, Jesus was no more alive in our friends' daily lives, romantic hopes, college plans, or friendships than he was before. In fact, once a friend "converted," Jesus barely ever re-entered our conversation. We'd done our job, they'd done theirs, and the memory was slightly embarrassing to revisit.

Winning a fast-track conversion by simply telling someone that "Jesus saves" is less honest and even easier than sharing what Jesus

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really means in our lives. If we admit that Christianity is no picnic, and that Jesus often leaves us walking in mysteries, two surprises await us. First, we'll ask ourselves many of the same questions that

Winning a fast-track conversion by simply telling someone that "Jesus saves" is less honest and even easier than sharing what Jesus really means in our lives.

only "nonbelievers" are supposed to ask. Second, we'll discover that our friends listen longer and with genuine interest. An open, personal dialogue with our friends is most likely when we open a window

into our own souls, confessing doubts and disappointments with God. Honesty makes spiritual conversations work.

Non-Christians

Most of us are scarcely willing to imagine the help and comfort non-Christians' current beliefs give them. We don't realize why a Wiccan finds hope in the Goddess, because we never asked or listened to her story of how she felt when she learned God was exclusively male. We don't realize that the Buddhist monk treasures Buddha's instruction to avoid touching women because he's personally witnessed sexual perversion in the church he used to attend. We remain ignorant about the spiritual hunger of those we meet because we fail to get to know them.

In the past, I (Jonalyn) have often struck up conversations on plane trips and noticed my internal stress as I find out my neighbor's religion. If my neighbor mentions church or God I relax, feeling like I'm with someone I don't have to convert. But if my neighbor lets on that she's spiritual but not religious, or angry at God, or any other non-Christian flavoring, I feel a tangible tightening in my stomach.

I have believed that next to me sits an "unbeliever" who needs to be saved, and until she accepts Jesus, she is a danger both to me and others. My Pavlovian reaction makes conversation awkward and

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agenda-driven from the start. In some cases I find myself believing that non-Christians are actually societal threats capable of shredding family values, corrupting morality, voting liberal, and mocking everything for which I stand. If I befriend them without saving them first, I might be corrupted by them! So I gear up to share the salvation message.

Perhaps you can relate to the fevered feeling to share Christ and discharge your duty. Perhaps you've ended up saying things that prove you don't really care to listen, like, "Jesus hung on Calvary for your sins"—as if the listener knows what Calvary means or who Jesus is or what sin is.

On one popular radio show we heard recently, professional apologists tried to bully college students into conversion by berating them with the Ten Commandments and the question, "How have you broken these?" The apologists followed up by pushing into the young people's lives with questions like, "Have you ever lusted after a woman? Jesus says that's the same as committing adultery with her in your heart." At this point most of the students excused themselves. Some explained they were Buddhists or atheists; some confessed their disbelief in the Bible.

Regardless, the apologists dismissed the students' point of view, ending any hope for mutual respect in the conversation. We heard the apologists announce the universal need for a savior and smoothly introduce Jesus and the "plan" of salvation. Few, if any students, accepted Jesus. It didn't matter; the radio host praised this apologist for his boldness and the method as a great way to witness and stand up for your faith. We groaned because we used to do the same thing.

One honest friend admits that talking about his faith is like intellectual arm wrestling. "If I don't crush them, I've lost. If I budge toward them, they've won." Evangelism is not arm wrestling, where we have to clench our teeth and monologue our point of view

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because we're afraid of losing, afraid this unbeliever might win the argument. Talking about Jesus isn't a contest.

For years we thought sharing our faith meant saying the right things to get people saved. But whenever we treat our friends as prob-

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lems to solve or objects to fix, we are not relating to them as people. As one wise man said, "You can't have a relationship with someone if you're objectifying them."

Women don't want men objectifying them as trophies; neither do our friends want us objectifying them as potential converts.

Perhaps we never risk sharing Jesus, because we know from experience that Christians already have a bad reputation for being pushy about their faith. We grow understandably nervous around non-Christians so we never utter a word about our faith, trying to be a good example, hoping they'll ask us a question one day. If our friend is hostile to religion, we carefully avoid any talk about God for fear of giving offense. Sometimes we simply have no idea what to say to someone so different from us.

Categorization and Calcification

We all once lived in a world without hard categories defining others and their beliefs. In *An American Childhood*, Annie Dillard reminds us of the ways we saw the world as children. Dillard is five when she realizes a world outside her window connects with her own. "Men with jackhammers broke up Edgerton Avenue. When I lay to nap, I listened. One restless afternoon I connected the new noise in my bedroom with the jackhammer men I had been seeing outside. I understood abruptly that these worlds met, the outside and the inside."¹

I (Dale) remember my own days connecting those dots, smiling when I discovered that the same mall we arrived at by car could be reached through back alleys on my bike. Or when I saw Mrs.

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Carver, my fourth-grade teacher, eating at a restaurant and dressed in street clothes. I discovered, to my surprise, that my teacher could appear in public, that she could live beyond the decorated walls of her classroom.

As children, when surprises jolt us, we simply adjust to the reality. When we're young, we bend ourselves to the changing shape of our world. But somewhere around junior high, the world's fluid categories begin to solidify. We begin to place people into boxes: jock, popular, nerd, pretty, gay, straight, the sick kid, the rich kid, the troublemaker.

As children, we were quick to reassign categories based on the steady inflow of new information. We had no choice; we had to assimilate. As adults, however, we resist modifying our categories. We surround ourselves with friends who affirm our calcified opinions. Our views of science, politics, money, class, and religion—of how things *ought* to be—are reinforced by the denomination or church small group we join. We justify our hard-line stances with our education and even our own interpretation of Scriptures. When our categories become more important than the people *in* the categories, we have become thoroughly modern adults who know how to justify our distance from our neighbor.

When my (Dale's) mom fought cancer, she remarked, "I'm not a cancer patient—I'm a person who has cancer!" By this point my mom had lost all her hair. She wore a wig, not for her own vanity, but to help people uncomfortable with her baldness. When her wig irritated her head, she'd whip it off without warning. She was right: people categorized her as a bald lady, as a cancer patient, as a dying person. But she was a *person* first, eager to keep living life.

The reason we need to hold our categories loosely is not that categories are inherently bad, but that often our categories are

Our views of science, politics, money, class, and religion—of how things ought to be—are reinforced by the denomination or church small group we join.

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incorrect. We file people in the wrong places and leave them there. Yet a child's humility teaches us to willingly bend to fit the world. Walling people into categories prevents us from loving them.

Social psychologists tell us we make up our mind about someone in minutes—all the more reason to consciously hold our categories loosely over the course of a life. If we label a teen as a misfit, we may be unable to learn from his insights about teen culture, and we may be cursing him with a label he feels unable to change. If we avoid a cancer patient because we find her depressing, we cannot learn her road of suffering. If we think of an elderly man as obsolete as he slowly writes a check in the grocery line, we cannot allow his slow pace to question our frenzied overachieving. If we think of a Sikh as someone who needs converting, we cannot learn what she believes about God. Unless we get to know our neighbors beyond their labels, we cannot make the most of our spiritual conversations with them.

In grammar school, I (Jonalyn) met Sakina, a girl from a Sikh family. Though I knew nothing about Sikhs, I knew they were not Christians, which meant their religion was wrong. I realized I might be her only chance to get to heaven.

My friends and I soon learned from Sakina that Sikhs should never cut their hair. That set Sakina apart from us, and we revered her unshorn baby ringlets hanging way down on her back. I admired her willpower and envied the length, a living Rapunzel. But mixed with my admiration was scorn. How silly to think that long hair could make you holy!

During craft time, I worked with a pair of scissors. Sakina was engrossed in her project directly in front of me, her black curls brushing my desk. I nudged my friend Heather and play-motioned snipping off one of those ringlets. Heather pulled my brandished arm away. "You can't do that," she whispered fiercely in my ear. "You'd get her in so much trouble. Don't you know about her religion?"

"I know," I replied flippantly. "I was just joking."

I had put Sakina in my non-Christian box. That stunt was my little way of proving that her religion was a load of hoey and that

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long hair didn't matter to *my* God. I imagined myself producing the cut curl and sermonizing to her that Jesus didn't care about long hair, but that he *had* died for her. And with snipped tresses, she'd have to leave Sikhism anyway, right? A foolproof witnessing plan!

A Label-Defying Jesus

Jesus didn't act like many modern evangelicals. When Jesus met people, he dignified their search for the good life, giving them parables to mull over and offering winsome, playful banter when they could handle his verbal sparring.^a Adults shunned children, but Jesus scooped them into his lap.^b When his culture considered women irrational and the private property of men, Jesus educated women and counted them among his closest friends.^c When the religious laws abused people, Jesus looked behind the law at God's intention to give life and health.^d When people had a faulty theology, he gently offered his living water.^e

In Jesus' world, everyone distinguished between two groups, male Jews who God loved and everyone else—Gentiles, Samaritans, tax collectors, women, and children. Today we still make distinctions of who is closer and further from the love of God, like moral Christians living in suburbs and morally questionable types like drug-addicts, homosexuals, Unitarians, politicians, or the sexually promiscuous. But Jesus overlooked his culture's hard-and-fast categories to love morally questionable types. He was dangerously attractive to the outcasts in his society. Both Jewish and non-Jewish masses followed Jesus—divorcees, adulterers, prostitutes, IRS guys, the weak, the demon oppressed, and the diseased. He loved them beyond their labels, seeing them as people, bearing the image of God.

Those outside the church often understand this category-bending humility better than those who claim to follow Jesus.

^a Matthew 13 and Mark 7:24–30. ^b Matthew 19:13–14. ^c Luke 10:39. ^d Mark 12:38–44. ^e John 4:11–15.

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Recently, secular feminists pushed many in the church to fully consider women as valuable as men in every walk of life—causing the church to remember Jesus’ view of women. Politically correct cries for tolerance can seem closer to the heart of Jesus’ love than Christians who joke about “gays” or “retards.” The secular concern with diversity may be more effective in inviting crowds awaiting fish and

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loaves than our derisive glances at those who don’t fit our categories of social, sexual, ethnic, and religious acceptability.

The recent book *unChristian* by David Kinnaman and

Gabe Lyons paints a clear picture of Christians’ reputation today: homophobic, intolerant, overly political, sheltered, hypocritical, and judgmental. This message humbles us, to be sure, but we can change the messages *we* send in our spiritual small talk—words that are empathetic, openly thoughtful, and culturally savvy. We then can begin to scrape the canvas clean and create a truly inviting picture.

Changing the way we do spiritual small talk begins with relearning our audience. Since church authority and traditional church attendance no longer claim people’s loyalty, Americans are turning to their own forms of spirituality. How do we talk with someone who has created a one-of-a-kind religion?

The Birth of Spiritual Designers

The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life reported in June 2008 that the number of people creating their own interpretations of faith and culture is growing. While 92 percent of Americans believe in God, less than half are confident in what God is like. These statistics validate what we see on high school and college campuses, at the mall, in coffee shops, and even among churchgoers all over the country.

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Spirituality is on the rise; religion is declining. Krista Tippett, radio host of National Public Radio's *Speaking of Faith*, explains that today's religions are "the containers of faith—malleable and corruptible in the hands of people who fashion and control them." Today people see spirituality as "faith's original impulse and essence," a way to relate to God without human ideas or corrupted texts getting in the way.² Many relate to God in spiritual, but not religious, ways, customizing their spirituality. As author Anne Lamott puts it in her memoir of finding Jesus, "Mine was a patchwork God, sewn together from bits of rag and ribbon, Eastern and Western, pagan and Hebrew, everything but the kitchen sink and Jesus."³ We call this "spiritual designing." Spiritual designers find the spiritual traditions, practices, and creeds that best fit their needs, and many hold to their newly minted spirituality with the same fervor for exclusivity and persuasion as any committed Christian or Muslim.

How can we tell if a person designs their own spirituality?

Spiritual designers are more concerned with relating to God than following doctrine. Suspicious of organized religion, they invest their time hunting for experiences of God rather than accepting theology from a religious authority. Often they will choose the type of spiritual beliefs and practices that feel most comfortable to them, borrowing from mutually exclusive religions. They find connection with God or their higher power through a cornucopia of channels. Some feel more spiritual when they chant or beat drums, others when they eat organic or vegan, others when they wear semiprecious gems, others when flying colorful prayer flags. Some tune into the frequency of the divine by visiting exotic places to sit under a yogi, others by uncovering secret meanings and decoding messages in nature or other holy books. Other spiritual designers cling to God through symbolic images, like dangling a cross from their rearview mirror. We've met many spiritual designers who call themselves "Christians" too.

Often spiritual designers are peace-keeping people reaching for a quieter, natural life, more concerned with balancing with

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Spiritual designers are more concerned with relating to God than following doctrine.

nature than pursuing technology. Spiritual designers, however, like all religious people, assume the world would be a better place if others discovered the same spiritual point of view. They search, like we all do, for love strong enough and truth compelling enough to embrace for life. A good conversation begins when we see them as fellow humans hungering for love as much as we are.

A Human Who Needed Love

One afternoon before we were married, I sat in a grocery store parking lot arguing with Dale. We had compressed all our wedding planning into three months, so every day included specific, time-sensitive deadlines. Dale's to-do list that day included making key calls and adding names to the guest list—but he had dropped the ball. In my mind, this was unacceptable.

I attacked him with my words, cutting him down, blaming him for incompetence and for ruining not just my afternoon, but *my* wedding. Did he even *want* this to work out? Now *I* would have to pick up after him.

After my verbal assault, Dale sat quietly. I could see pain in his eyes. I expected he would scold me or tell me I couldn't talk to him like that, but he didn't. After a long pause, he asked softly, "Jonalyn, is that how you talk to yourself?"

His question stunned me. I could scarcely manage to nod as tears spilled down my cheeks. Sitting in the car in that parking lot, I wept long and hard. For the first time I realized how my unkindness grew from the root of fear that I was not good enough. I was so accustomed to living with self-imposed pressure to be a model Christian woman that I couldn't love or enjoy the love of those around me.

My behavior toward Dale sprung from my fears about God, whom I had designed to be exacting and ungracious. I was demand-

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ing because I had designed a God who was demanding. I berated myself because it was the only way I knew how to motivate myself.

Dale saw the wounded person behind my judgmental words and showed me something about following Jesus that I had never experienced: I could fail and still be accepted. Only in receiving love without conditions could I know how to give unconditional love. Even though I had claimed Jesus for twenty years as my “personal Lord and Savior,” I finally began to taste Jesus’ love like this.

In Jesus’ eyes I wasn’t merely a flustered fiancée, a blamer, or a fearful, controlling person. Jesus and Dale looked beyond that and saw me as a human who needed love.⁴ This is the way Jesus would have us share love with others, especially spiritual designers. We get to look beyond their different beliefs and into their human souls to see our shared struggles.

In America, many of our friends already have inklings about Jesus, but they haven’t tasted his love. As we talk with our friends, whoever they are and wherever they come from, we want to move them to experience God’s love. “No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.”^f We are an arm of God’s love. “In this world we are like Jesus.”^g We cannot underestimate the way our stories of God’s love to us allow our friends to entertain the hope that God loves them too.

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People Packages

All people are like packages. God invites us to look beyond the outside labels and give people our attention. Jesus shows us how to open the envelopes of people’s lives and know our neighbors beyond the roles they play. Like the wrapping, our bodies conceal

^f1 John 4:12. ^g1 John 4:17.

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our souls within. Each person holds unknown surprises, unique concerns, interests, and motivations. What's inside the packages we call people?

Often we mistakenly assume we know a human package because of a label like *mom, president, teacher, prayer warrior*. A person is more than the car they drive, the job they serve, the family they come from, the religion they follow. Too often we think we

A person is more than the car they drive, the job they serve, the family they come from, the religion they follow.

know a person because we know a few of their roles. But a person is more than what they do.

People are like money; they exist beyond the roles they play.

Notice those green bills you carry around as currency. When you hand over a few dollars to pay for groceries, you have not handed over money; you've handed over pieces of paper with green ink. That's all a dollar bill literally is, though we've agreed as a society to use these greened papers to exchange goods. That's why they all say, "Federal Reserve Note"; they're worth something as long as our federal system holds. We could cut a bill into strips to use as bookmarks and it would still remain paper with green ink, but it would no longer be currency. Notice the difference between what a dollar bill *is* and what a dollar bill *does*.

In the same way, observe the difference between what people *are* (a human made to reflect God) and what they *do* (their job or label). For instance, the kind nurse, Cynthia, we met at the hospital is more than a nurse. She could quit practicing medicine, but she would still be Cynthia, body and soul. As we talked with her, we glimpsed what was inside, her natural, human concerns. She fears God's anger toward her for living with a man she never married. That lawn man we talked with last week isn't only a lawn guy. He is Pedro, who works three jobs and wishes his oldest son was not running with a rough crowd. Pedro just happens to be pushing a rotor over manicured grass. Our neighbor Elisa, who drapes Bud-

What Is My Neighbor?

dhist prayer flags from tree to tree, is not merely a Buddhist; she could convert to another religion and still be Elisa. At core, she is a human who happens to believe that her karmic debt is heavy from poor decisions in her twenties.

We would love people better if we looked beyond their labels and opened the package of their souls. Though our conclusions differ, we can learn from British secular writer Karen Armstrong, who recommends that when we study any new religious idea, we ought to “keep on asking, ‘But why? But why?’ ... until you come to the point where you can imagine yourself feeling the same.”⁵

Will we label the couple next door based on their Hanukkah display, or will we get to know them and discover their daily fear for their son’s safety in Iraq?

Why does our neighbor flirt and smirk and scowl? What makes her eyes gleam with anticipation? Who makes her feel safe? What comforts, fears, or questions does her religion bring to her? Will we label the couple next door based on their Hanukkah display, or will we get to know them and discover their daily fear for their son’s safety in Iraq? Do we know the reason our friend strings prayer flags from her balcony? Beneath and inside their spirituality, *who are they?*

Who are *we*?

What Is Our Neighbor?

Today we ask the same question that the law student asked Jesus, “Who is our neighbor?”^b In today’s American conversations, this question often assumes we identify our neighbor by the role they play. In other words, when we answer “Who is my neighbor?” we might say, “Oh, she’s a Buddhist,” or “He’s a gun fanatic,” or “She’s a business owner.” “Who are they?” often means, “What do they do?” and “Where are they from?” We know we’re supposed to love

^b Luke 10:29.

Part I: Making Spiritual Small Talk

those different from us, but we continue to think about them primarily through the label, which dims our vision of them and who they can become. How often we have found ourselves labeling our neighbors, “That’s our street’s busybody!” or “Lucy’s always a ditz,” or “Those Mormons,” or “Crazy David.” We must change our pri-

We know we’re supposed to love those different from us, but we continue to think about them primarily through the label, which dims our vision of them and who they can become.

vate language to clean the lens through we which we see them by asking first, “*What* is our neighbor?”

Jesus answers the law student’s question about neighbors with the story of the Good Samaritan, a man whose

humility springs from recognizing a beaten body as a human. The priest and Levite passed by an unclean, Jewish victim, but the Samaritan stopped for a fellow human.ⁱ As Christian essayist and author Madeleine L’Engle writes, “The root word of *humility* is *humus*, earth; to be *human*, too, comes from the same word.”⁶ Instead of asking *who* our neighbor is and slapping on a label, we must ask the deeper, less obvious question first, “*What* is my neighbor?” Our neighbors are human and, like us, made of earth. We are all “but dust,” as the Psalmist says, but we all live because of God’s breath.^j We share the same dependence on our frail bodies, the same concerns and hopes for this life, and the same wondering hope for life beyond the grave.

An Invitation to Be More Human

When we make a habit of seeing others not by their labels, but by their humanity, we give them a taste of God wooing them. They learn they are valuable for what they *are*, not for what they can *do*, nor what they believe; they understand the first premise of the

ⁱ Matthew 19:19. ^j Psalm 103:14; Psalm 104:29; Genesis 2:7.

What Is My Neighbor?

gospel, “For God so loved the world,” this world teeming with frail and glorious humans.^k We’re inviting them to notice their humanity as we have noticed ours.

We will introduce them to a God who wants to reclaim the original plan for humans. We are more than mere dust, more than wormy, sin-infested creatures. The incarnation of Jesus means that our humanity hasn’t sunk so low as to be worthless to God.

Our humanity is a lost thing that has to be found. Jesus shows us what humans can be. He proves we need not always say, “I can’t help messing up. I’m only human.” Jesus pulled our humanity up from the depths, teaching us that our flaws arise from our fallenness, not our humanness.

Most people think Christianity focuses merely on good behavior, church membership, or going to heaven when they die, not on redeeming humanity. But God’s essential reason for making humans was to create beings that reflected him, bright mirrors without spot or blemish.^l He reaffirmed his plan when “the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.” Madeleine L’Engle again explains, “As Christians we are meant to be not less human than other people but more human, just as Jesus of Nazareth was more human.”⁷

Jesus showed us what humans are meant to look like; he incarnates God’s original blueprint. We point our neighbors to Jesus, a model of what we all, with God’s help, can become. Jesus invites us into a journey that ends with making us fully human.^m

That’s his plan, one that we constantly try to communicate. How do we have the kind of loving discourse that rolls out a red carpet to welcome our neighbors in?

^k John 3:16. ^l Genesis 1:27. ^m Matthew 16:25.



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