

“Change: Part One

Rev. 22:19; Deut. 4:2; 12:32

On Sunday evenings for quite a while we’ve been talking about teaching others. I want to continue in the vein this evening with some other things thrown in. Dan Brown preached in NJ for quite some time. The church there was about the size of West Side when he arrived. Over the next few years it went from 70 to 100 to 125 to 150. When these numbers began being seen by other churches it was asked how they were doing this. Dan simply said, “we’re being friends to others”.

After I read his article on this subject, I called Dan and had some questions for him. I first asked him to explain his “program” so that I could put together a sermon to help my congregation. He agreed to answer a few questions.

My first question was, “How is what you are doing different from what churches of Christ have historically done?”

Dan said, “what we are conscious of as we live our lives is that there are people all around us that need a friend. It may be a waiter in a restaurant, it may be the kid at the counter at McDonalds or the receptionist in the Dentist office. Wherever we go during the day we stay aware of others. We watch for cues, listen for words that will tell us that this person is crying out, ‘will you be my friend?’ As I started this, I became amazed at how many of these cues I had been missing over the years. We do not try to convert them in this first encounter, that comes with time. But we do try to find a way to spend time with them. Maybe invite them to a small group or to a pot luck or even to our home for dinner. That sort of thing. The key is we’re not trying to convert them at minute one – we’re trying to become their friend.”

I next asked Dan, “when then do you begin to teach them?” His answer surprised me a little.

Dan said, “We don’t consciously try to steer things toward the Bible, that just happens over time. We constantly listen for those opportunities, but we want this new friend to “Ask-Seek-Knock” instead of us doing it for them. We tried that approach of going out to teach the Bible and it got us nowhere. We have found over a few months to a year that this new friend will begin the conversation when they are at the right place in their life. We also found that when we tried to manipulate the Bible into the relationship it failed every time and most of the times took this person out of the circle of friends. So, we learned that allowing the friend to control that component of the relationship produced fruit.”

Next, I asked Dan, “do you never mention the Bible at any time before they asked about it?”

Dan said, “no, we might say something like “I’ll pray for you” when a surgery came up or they shared that they had lost a friend or family member to death. But even then, we did not get all “preachy” about the matter. What we learned is you truly must accept people where they are. They may not have any interest in spiritual things when you befriend them but over time they are knowingly or unknowingly developing a kind of desire to know about God. We found the best approach to their turning on a spiritual component is to just allow them to move at their own pace. This requires a change of thinking for most Christians. We’ve always been taught to initiate, initiate, initiate. That can and often does turn into pushing someone to a point where we force a decision on them that they are not ready to make, and they walk.”

Next, I asked Dan, “do you ever just invite them to church?”

Dan said, “Our congregation has asked me to preach sermons on Sunday mornings that will appeal to a very broad base of people. Sermons on current events, on social topics, things that are in their lives and in the news. Thankfully there is no shortage of things to talk about given our world and the sin in it. I try to get sermons ready a few weeks in advance.

This way I can announce these sermons in advance by email and in the bulletin, so the brethren know what's coming. If something they see in my list is what their new friend(s) need they invite them to come and listen to that sermon. Our congregation also has a pot luck every week in the building. We do this through care groups. That way not every member is involved every week. The church provides the cost for food and this is a useful way for my friend to become acquainted with others in the church. It is non-threatening and familial in its approach.”

Next, I asked Dan “If I want to implement this, what is the first thing we need to do?” Again, his answer surprised me.

Dan said, “You will need to work on becoming friendly. In the church we have a mentality that we are right and everyone in all the other churches on earth are wrong. I would say that I believe that to be Biblically correct. The Bible is very narrow on who God recognizes as His child. Having said that, we may be correct but how we portray that has not always been productive. We can win the battle and lose the war is a phrase I've used many times to describe our behavior. Let me give you an example. We believe the Bible teaches that baptism is for the remission of sins – and it is. How do we convey that to people so that they accept that truth? Historically we've debated it; berated the false teaching of the denominations; corrected false teaching every time we've had opportunity. Having done all that, how many have we persuaded? It is far better we have found, to talk to a friend and share with them what we did to be saved and why we did that. Telling them they are wrong, and their family is wrong and their church is wrong seldom converts. But telling that person that you heard and believed the gospel and it convicted you of your sin is a start. Sharing your conversion experience is personal and they know it. When you tell them what you found and how you found it is more likely to move a person spiritually than beating them up with scripture to win a discussion. Yes baptism is for the purpose of removing sin, but how do we BEST convey that truth to our new friend?”

My discussion with Dan took place more than 20 years ago. I've never forgotten how genuinely concerned Dan was for the future of the church. His congregation continued to use "friendship Evangelism" and grew to more than 400 in time. Think about West Side being in the 70's now and in just three years we could have more than 100 saints worshipping God here and working together. Then those 100 befriend their 100 and then do it again. We could fill this building in less than 10 years.

The biggest issue for most people is CHANGE. I believe that this is a stumbling block to more people than we may think. I know I for one resist change.

I like bacon and eggs every morning; I like a turkey and cheese sandwich every day at noon; I like a chicken breast, baked potato and salad every evening. I could eat those three meals without variation for life and be very happy.

I taught a ladies Bible class in Flint, MI back in the 70's. One of our ladies got a magazine about making the home and new recipes. Whatever was on the cover of that magazine was what we were going to have at one of our classes that month. I hated that. Variables, risk, change.

Most of us like sameness in most things. Not saying we don't enjoy new car or new clothes but when we examine even that we don't change much. So, when we are trying to bring someone to Jesus, remember how much of a change that was for you! All the things that had to be overcome and many things that had to be done away with. That is what some of our friends hear when we talk with them about Jesus. "What am I going to have to give up or quit?"

Change for many people is the hardest thing they must do in life. Think about when you got married. Remember what it was like sharing a bed with someone? Or sharing a bathroom? If you are a neat freak and your mate is not? The little things that drive you crazy about the other party. This change is minor when you compare it with eternal things.

As we meet people and befriend people let's be sensitive to their needs but also be willing to accept them right where they are and move slowly with them.

It is good to want everyone we meet to go to heaven. But we don't have the ability to move them there tonight! It will take time and their moving at a pace that will allow them to change.

Now, get out there and find some new friends. May God bless us in our efforts to bring others to Jesus.