

Opening Doors to Conversations at Work

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A DRIVING RAIN PELTED ME AS I RAN TO THE front of the building, only to hear that maddening clatter you get when you pull on locked glass doors. Mercifully, an elderly woman moved towards the doors from inside, and in short order had me comfortably settled in the lobby. Like an elegant hostess, she sat with me there—dust rag in hand—and chatted as I waited for a senior manager in the firm to show up for our meeting.

"I clean this office," she said in what I later learned was an East European accent, moving her arm in a sweeping motion to show me the lobby. "What do you do?" I told her a little about my work as a Christian writer (which puzzled and bored her, I think), but when I mentioned I was also a chaplain, she perked right up. "I, too, am a Christian." She said it with a certainty and a satisfaction that must surely have pleased God. I waited for her to tell me more, but only silence followed.

"Am I keeping you from your work?" I asked, not wanting to get her in trouble. She shook her head to indicate I wasn't, and then explained that she always finished early, and added, "I like to come down here and watch the people come to work." There was a hint of loneliness to this last statement, an almost wistful whisper of sadness. So I asked her more questions about her story.

At first her answers were brief. It was obvious she was used to short attention spans, people asking questions to be polite but with little interest in the answers. When she realized I was interested, though, she settled into the role of storyteller with alacrity. I was

treated to delicious tidbits of her personal history that had us both smiling.

All the people who were important to her were no longer around. I wasn't made privy to the details of their absence, and my hostess-turned-storyteller had too much dignity to complain. Whether they died or moved away or simply neglected her wasn't part of the tale I had permission to know. Only once, when she was telling me a part of someone else's woes, did I get a glimpse of her own thoughts. Describing that person's loneliness, she said quietly that "...they only want to matter to someone."

When my friend the senior manager arrived for our appointment, he greeted my hostess by name and thanked her for taking care of me while I waited. She nodded shyly and smiled, then looked at me and answered, "I didn't want him to be lonely in this big place."

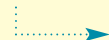
I wasn't.

When I first recounted this story to readers of our online devotion, it garnered one of the biggest responses we ever received. The woman reminded many people of someone in their workplace they admired, or the story reminded them of an encounter they'd had that was similar. Every email seemed to talk about a connection this story made in their life.

Why?

What about this woman's demeanor makes this so special?

How might we replicate that in our own workplaces?



Scripture Passage

Acts 17:16-34

Study

“Marketplace ministry” is never just about evangelism. It is about how our work glorifies God, how it tends and contributes to His Kingdom and His children, and so much more. That said, evangelism and marketplace ministry should never be mutually exclusive terms. What we talk about at work is how our coworkers, customers, vendors and investors will define us, and their view of God’s importance in our lives. If we never speak of Christ at work, many who work with us will assume He is not an important part of our lives. But in a world that values pluralism, how can we speak of our faith in ways that are appropriate to the setting?

Read Acts 17:16-34.

Early in American work culture, businesses were discouraged from being open on Sundays because it was the Sabbath. While the Sabbath is no longer acknowledged in our Western working culture, it has created a new way for Christians to be “marked out” as believers. Choosing *not* to work on Sundays has become a way to open discussions with others about our faith as they seek to understand why the matter is important to us. In fact, an entire tribe of people was once reached for Christ simply because their chief wanted to know more about a God who cared enough about His people to order them to rest.

Can you think of other ways Christians can mark themselves as believers that might open up conversations about their faith?

Don’t be surprised if you had trouble with the preceding list. It’s difficult in the chaotic pace of Western work culture to have time to think about intentional ways to draw illustrations of faith from workplace settings. Here’s help with your list:

- *Alcohol.* While there are widely divergent opinions on whether Christians should drink, workers who don’t drink are often pegged as religious, opening up the chance to talk about their faith.
- *Language, humor.* Mild expletives are creeping into the daily conversations of Christians more and more frequently now. While swearing doesn’t mean you aren’t a follower of Christ, not swearing often marks us as a believer among your coworkers.

Again, this often opens up the chance to talk about our faith. The same is true of the stories we listen to and repeat.

- *Complaining.* Less subtle, but still effective, is the person who rarely criticizes or complains. While water-cooler beefing about the boss is a popular pastime, not doing so is often an invitation to more edifying conversations.
- *Respect.* Courtesy and respect are rapidly becoming distinguishing characteristics also. While Christians aren't the only ones who lay claim to these as bedrock principles, their presence greases the chutes of acceptability when we talk about more important matters.
- *Not criticizing Christians from other denominations.* Funny as this may sound, many non-Christians tell me they're turned off to the Christian faith because of how their Christian coworkers treat each other.

What do you think are the key differences between an “evangelist” and a “witness” in the workplace?

Of these two, which one characterizes your approach to sharing your faith in your job? What do you do that you think makes your approach effective? What have you found to be *ineffective*?

The Apostle Paul was Jewish, as faithful to his religion as one might hope to be. So faithful, in fact, that he persecuted Christians with particular ardor. Isn't it striking, then, that when he became a Christian, he would become known as the man who carried the Gospel to the non-Jews around the world? How he did so is instructive for us in discovering ways to reach out in our work culture. Let's study his approach in Athens, Greece, a place known for worshipping many gods.

Read Acts 17:16. In this passage, we find Paul provoked by the city's idols. List some of the things in your workplace that provoke you spiritually. (Just list them for now. We'll come back to the list later in this study.)

Read Acts 17:22-23. Describe what just happened here, comparing verse 16 with verses 22-23. What did Paul do?

By taking something that originally offended him, Paul overcame the temptation to introduce his faith in with a chip on his shoulder. Why is this effective?

What kind of chips are you carrying on your shoulder about your faith?

Paul's ability to overcome something that originally offended him eventually led to a marvelous sermon he delivered at the Areopagus, something we Christians refer to as his sermon on Mars Hill. That sermon would never have been delivered had Paul made his first speech in Athens about how the statue to an unknown god offended him.

Our ability to reign in our responses to things that offend our spiritual sensibilities may in fact increase the likelihood we'll have an opportunity to talk about more important matters of faith with an attentive audience.

In fact, at Marketplace Network we often tell people that the number one thing people can do to affect their workplace for Christ is to bond with other believers there. People aren't attracted to bickering faith.

I Peter 3:15 tells us we should be ready to give an answer, or to be in a state of "always being ready to make a defense ... for the hope that is in you." Paul demonstrated this by having carefully studied that which provoked him, and discovering a gracious way to communicate a truth about God in it. Return to the list of things which provoke you in your workplace. Study them, asking yourself how your response to each has advanced or hindered Christ's presence there. Select just one and map out how you might use it as a doorway to communicating Christ in a meaningful way. Can you put that into practice this coming week?

In verse 28 of this Mars Hill sermon, Paul further demonstrates effective communication by folding in a reference to the poets these Athenians knew. He was always careful to find ways to speak about Christ using images and references which sparked resonance in his listeners. In our next study, we'll see how Christian jargon can puzzle our co-workers.

Common Sense and Eternal Principles

- People aren't attracted to a negative faith.
- Getting along with other Christians at work is an effective way to testify to the changes Christ can make in us.
- We must identify the chips we carry on our shoulders about faith, and manage the way we communicate our frustration or unhappiness.
- Simple obedience to Scripture can often mark us as believers to our coworkers. So can choosing not to exercise our rights to engage in certain activities or behaviors.
- We must consider carefully how even our social interactions affect our chances to talk about God.