‘WONDERED’ INTO ANYONE’S HEART LATELY?

Many of our evangelistic efforts can build walls, perpetuating the “us vs. them” standoff. But there are ways to “wonder” into someone’s heart—and you just might find that these ways help someone wonder her way to God.

In April 2003, National Public Radio aired a news story about a standoff between an angry mob of Iraqi Shiites and a heavily armored patrol from the American 101st Airborne Division. Fearing that the soldiers were about 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 most likely have ended in tragedy—had it not been for the quick thinking of U.S. Lt. Col. Christopher Hughes.

The commanding officer that day, Hughes picked up a loud speaker and barked three simple commands to his group. 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. Within moments of obeying his orders, NPR reported, the troops saw

the crowd's demeanor transform. Hostility and defiance melted away, as smiles and friendly pats on the back replaced shaking fists and screaming voices.

Though not immediately apparent, this hopeful story from the war in Iraq holds important implications for Christian outreach in a world that's becoming increasingly hostile to traditional evangelistic methods. As author Ravi Zacharias says of today's evangelism, "We must learn to find the backdoor to people's hearts because the front door is heavily guarded."

Much like the Shiites Lt. Col. Hughes dealt with, many people we hope to reach with the Gospel 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 they hear, "My worldview is better than yours, so let me tell you why I'm right and you're wrong." Instead of opening hearts to Christ, we merely perpetuate the "us vs. them" standoff.

So, how do we keep from becoming embroiled in these no-win, never-ending evangelistic quagmires?

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The Wisdom of Wondering

I've discovered that one way to engage people is through a simple and highly effective approach called *active wondering*—a process that sparks curiosity and encourages people to ask spiritual questions for themselves.

Active wondering means intentionally formulating open-ended questions that tap into the interests of others or what they're concerned about, and it requires us to start where people are, not where we'd like them to be. When we wonder out loud with someone about what's important to him—his life, career, family, etc.—we create an open, safe and non-judgmental forum for authentic dialog. People are invited to search for their own answers; they're naturally stimulated toward spiritual seeking. Wondering sends the message: "I notice you, and your thoughts matter to me." And by extension, "Your thoughts matter to God."

I've seen the Holy Spirit use this "wonder power" to stir the imaginations of people far from God into making new discoveries about themselves and nudging them toward the Cross. Sounds good, doesn't it? There is, however, a cost. Active wondering requires us to give up the illusion that we can manipulate or argue people into the Kingdom. If we force our agenda on the conversation instead of zeroing in on topics people *want* to explore—and incidentally, where the Holy Spirit is already at work in their lives—it just doesn't work. Col. 4: 5-6 says it like this: "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 Message*).

In short, manipulative approaches communicate disrespect and stifle the Kingdom's supernatural lure.

The Wonder of Conversations

Three years ago, I signed up to be my own general contractor to build our new home. In more than 22 years of full-time evangelistic ministry, no other decision has put me in closer, day-to-day contact with rough-talking, hardworking guys who don't know Jesus. Throughout the job, I worked, sweated, got dirty and problem solved with my framing crew.

One day fairly early into the project, I overheard a worker instructing a new guy on the job to refrain from cussing or telling X-rated, Howard Stern-type stories around me because I was a "religious guy." Like it or not, these guys had not only started to frame my house, they'd also begun to form opinions about me that I knew would make connecting with their hearts difficult.

Later that fall, one of the guys mentioned the "C-word"—church, which immediately prompted everyone around to engage in the sport of church-bashing. Years ago, I might have launched into a sermon defending the virtues of going to church, but instead I said, "I'm just wondering … what kinds of experiences have you guys had that made you see church the way you do now?"

It was like my little question exploded a dam that had been holding back a torrent of emotion. One by one, they passionately shared stories of abuse and selfishness they'd experienced from church and church people. I listened quietly, sadly identifying with much of what they said.

As you can see, initiating wondering conversations is all about context. And

WHAT WONDERING IS NOT

- Using questions to gain control of the conversation so that you can get your point across.
- A set of memorized questions to push someone toward making a decision.
- A springboard from which to launch into a monolog.

listening carefully to people is the starting point. As you listen, genuine questions that motivate people to think deeper about their lives will surface if you let them. The good news is that you don't have to force God into the picture. He is always there in the background, the foreground or somewhere in-between—and at the end of the day, He *is* the answer.

My crew didn't need much prompting to take their conversation to a deeper level. A few days later, they began poking fun at Ron, the self-proclaimed "hell-raiser" of the group, about comments he'd made in that earlier discussion. Ron answered them with a quiet look and a deadly serious tone, "What are you guys laughing at? You know you'll all be in Hell with me someday." I sat there tongue-tied. I've traveled the world preaching about how to find forgiveness and get into heaven, but I knew Ron and the others well enough to recognize that an evangelistic sermon from me wasn't likely to do the trick. I didn't know how to respond to Ron in that moment—not until I gave my "wonder" more time to percolate.

That's when I discovered something truly amazing about wondering. When I don't know how to wisely respond to someone, or if I just miss an opportunity, I can "wonder back" into that conversation a few weeks later or even a few months later. That's what happened with Ron.

Ron answered them with a quiet look and a deadly serious tone, "What are you guys laughing at? You know you'll all be in Hell with me someday."

A month later over lunch on the jobsite, I said to him, "I've been thinking a lot about something you said a while back."

"What's that?" he replied.

"Well, I meet a lot of people in my line of work who are sure they're going to heaven. I don't meet as many who are as confident as you are that they're going to Hell. I'm wondering, what makes you so sure you're headed there?"

I listened as Ron told me about the "unforgivable" things he'd done during his years in a motorcycle gang. After hearing his long list, I said, "You sound like a condemned man on death row with no hope of pardon. I wonder if you'd be interested in hearing another idea about what God has in store for you?" Ron listened carefully as I talked about Jesus giving His life to pay for his crimes. He didn't pray to receive Christ at that moment, but he did say, "Maybe there is hope for me." As he walked off the site, his impasse with God was broken.

The Wonder of Eternity

Several weeks later, Ron pulled me aside to let me know he'd gone with his live-in girlfriend to see the movie "The Passion of The Christ." When I asked what he thought of it, he said, "It really messed up my life. My girlfriend just gave her life to Christ, and now she wants to get married and go to church every Sunday!"

"So it sounds like you're upset because your girlfriend has changed so much that you're not sure who you're really living with anymore," I said. "I'm wondering what's holding you back from doing what she did so that you could both enjoy this new life together?"

Ron confessed his inability to clean up his life and said that he didn't want to become like the people in the church he disdained, "the hypocrites."

"Ron, I'm wondering if you believe God is big enough to do what you know you can't do on your own?" I replied. "I've never thought of it that way before," he said. "I'd like to think about it."

My conversations with Ron reminded me of Eccl. 3:11 which tells us that God has "set eternity in the hearts" of all men and women—He's created each of us to naturally wonder about life. And that wonder can bring us to a place of asking and seeking. As Matt. 7:7 affirms, when we ask and seek God, we will find.

This spring, the crew came back to finish up some odds and ends. When no one else was around, Ron told me he'd gone to church on Easter. And what's more, he actually admitted to *enjoying* the service. Ron hasn't made a decision for Christ yet. But I'm definitely wondering how much longer it will take for the eternity God put in his heart to catch up to him.

Lt. Col. Hughes saved the day as he acted in wisdom toward the Iraqis. I pray that the Church will follow his example. Let's take a knee (a position of humility, whereby we come as listeners and wonderers—not know-it-alls). Let's point our guns to the ground (backing away from the confrontational attempts to overpower people with our dogmatic certainty). And let's look up and smile (communicate that we're warm, friendly people who come to build bridges of care).

I wonder what would happen to our churches and our world if we did?

WONDERING QUESTIONS

- I love people who have deep convictions. I'm *wondering* how you arrived at the conclusions you feel so strongly about?
- As you look back over your life, I'm *wondering* if you've had any experiences that might fall into the category of a "God encounter?"
- I'm *wondering* what kinds of experiences you've had that made you see church the way you do now?
- If you could pick up a phone and have a free, five-minute conversation with God, I'm *wondering* what questions you'd ask Him?