

Conversations of Hope and Grace:
Three Insights on God's Mission Reaffirmed
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Recently I met a gentleman I'm going to call John. Each traveling alone on business, we happened to sit near each other in a restaurant at the counter, having dinner and watching the NBA championship series. Engaging in polite conversation, the question of what each does for a living came up. He works for a large beer importer/distributor, which explained his choice in beers. I told him that I am a Lutheran pastor and work for the Center for U.S. Missions as the Director of Training.

Our two and a half hour conversation included basketball, marriage, family, faith, the Church, local churches, Christianity and God--or god?, as he understood it. I was able to share the faith with him, and the hope I have in Jesus. I also learned a lot about John and his beliefs. Three important insights were reaffirmed for me through this conversation. As I share John's beliefs and experience, I invite you to consider them in the context of these three insights.

First, John and people like him are lost souls who are decent people--not evil forces out to destroy the Church and Christianity. As I listened to John, I was reminded how fragile, hurting and sometimes disenchanted with the church and the world many non-believers and former-believers are. Second, God is desperately in love with John and people like him and longs for them to know and live in the grace he has prepared for them through faith in Jesus. Third, God invites believers like you and me to relate his love and grace to John and people like him. Although by most measures John's life is good, I invite you to view his beliefs and experience through the lens of a lost soul who is hurting.

John represents much of what the emerging culture experiences and believes today. He is a former believer who grew up attending a Presbyterian church. His wife is Lutheran, somewhat regular in her church attendance. They have a good income and choose to live in the heart of the city. They value the diversity of their community and believe that by participating in the life of the community and taking precautions, they are relatively safe from the city's potential dangers. He and his wife volunteer several hours a week in various neighborhood community services.

Our conversation turned to religion and what each of us believes. From a denial that there is a God, to the suggestion that *The Da Vinci Code* might be right about the Church, John circled around to acknowledging a belief that there must be a higher force/power that is a first cause. He stopped short of saying that the higher power was or is God, although he admitted it to be possible. If this force is God, he believes he is not connected to or interested in us.

Why/how did John become a former believer? In short, he can't get a satisfactory answer to the age-old question, "Why do bad things happen to good people?" The longer story is rooted in his life experience. His parents' divorce when he was seventeen caused him devastating hurt and pain. He could not understand that a loving God would allow this hardship to come to him and his parents. More than 20 years later, he still lives in this grief and pointed to the divorce as the cause of his loss of faith in a benevolent God who would send his son to die for humanity. The tragedies, violence and injustice in the world, while not experienced directly by him, have only confirmed this belief for him.

John acknowledges the historical Jesus but not his divinity. His falling away from the faith has led him to question the validity of the Church. He does not perceive the Church as making a significant contribution to the world through works of service. He does not believe that God, if he exists, would want people to spend an hour or more on Sunday sitting in church worshiping him instead of being out in the community doing something worthwhile with that time, as he does. Interestingly, he said if he and his wife could find a church that allowed them to invest their time doing works of service instead of sitting in church, he would attend it.

In my conversation with John, I initially had a sense of "Uh oh, here comes the attack on the Church and organized religion." There were elements of that attack at first, but as I listened, I realized that any attack came not from animosity but from a deep and profound hurt. John is looking for reassurance and hope in the face of hurt and disenchantment in this world and his life. He is not looking for an apologist for the faith, although some would be tempted to be one. John needs Christian people who will see the lost, hurting soul he is and will love him enough to listen to him. He needs Christian people who will in a gentle way share with him the hope that is in them through faith in Jesus. I was able to be one of those people. He was able to accept that I believe and find hope in this faith even if he does not.

It is important to understand that I was able to share my hope in Jesus with John because I first took the time to listen to him without condemning him. I believe God is inviting the Church to spend more time listening and learning from people like John. Imagine what our communities would look like if each of us, like John and his wife, volunteered several hours a week in the community in the name of Jesus!

God invites us to see people like John as he sees them--lost souls whom he loves and for whom he gave his Son Jesus so they may have eternal life. God invites each of us to be ready to share the hope that is in us with people like John. We are invited to have conversations of hope, anchored in the faith based on God's grace in our lives, trusting God to plant and water the seeds of faith in those whom he has chosen.

Finally, I invite you to pray for John (God knows his real name) as I do; and also for those you know and meet who do not have faith in Jesus. Pray for him and them by name so that they are more than the generic "the lost" about whom we hear. That many lost people are overwhelming in their vastness and we can hardly wrap our minds around

their need for the gospel. So I invite you to pray for this individual privately and in your church service.

Questions for Reflection:

1. What, if anything, surprises you in John's beliefs?
2. Have you ever fallen into viewing non-believers as opponents or enemies? If so, what do you need to help you see them as God sees them?
3. What does your church teach, preach and say about non-believers? What changes, if any, need to be made in your conversations?
4. Who do you know like John?
5. What opportunities are there for you to have *a conversation of hope anchored in the faith based on God's grace in your life* with the person(s) you know?
6. What in John's experience and beliefs is similar to those of person(s) you know who don't believe? What is similar to your own?
7. What steps will you take to develop your life story so that you can relate it to the lives of others in a hope-filled way?
8. How can we in our churches help prepare each other for such encounters? Have you ever role-played such a conversation with other Christians?
9. Is your church involved in the community? What would people in your community know, without coming in your doors, about what your church *does*?