

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

NUMBER 45 - JULY 1996



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Making conversation— part of obeying Jesus

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Unfortunately I didn’t see the value of this advice until late in life. Most important, until recent years I didn’t realize that making conversation is an important part of obeying the teaching of Jesus.

✓ Conversation shows love.



Talking with the people around us lets them know that we know they exist, and that we value them and are interested in them. It’s a way of saying, “you matter.” If I make no effort to learn anything about a person I’m with, I seem to be saying, “I’m sure that nothing about you could be interesting or worth

knowing. I don’t consider you deserving of my valuable time and attention.” That’s a painful put-down. So making conversation is the loving thing to do.

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An exhausting experience

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I made a valiant effort

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I learned that he was dean of one of the university’s colleges that I knew little about. I asked him how long he had been in that position. He was new at this university, I found, so I asked where he had previously taught, and what had led him to move. I asked him about his family and the city where he had formerly lived. I asked about his academic field and how he had become attracted to it. It was a rare one, so I had a hard time knowing what to ask about it, but I made my best effort.



He didn’t help

He answered all my questions, but he never volunteered any information or took any initiative to keep the conversation going. He never asked me anything about myself, even though I gave him numerous clues that he could have easily pursued. When the time for table conversation ended, I felt exhausted. Being totally responsible for the conversation had been hard work.

When the banquet speaker finished and we got up to leave, my conversation partner was suddenly effusive. “It has been *such a pleasure* to get to know you!” he gushed. With that, I gave up. I had to bite my tongue to keep from saying, “You didn’t get to know me at all!”

board meetings, therefore, we often need to sit deliberately with someone we don't know, and to make conversation. We need to make conversation, too, with Sunday School class visitors who don't yet know class members. If we don't talk with our visitors and fellow church members enough to get to know them, we're merely a gathering of disconnected people—we're not a community.



✓ **Conversation helps us work together.**



When we don't get to know each other, we also miss seeing how to work together to do needed ministries and to address church issues that need attention. To discover our fellow church members' gifts, talents, and concerns so that we can cooperate, we must have conversations that go beyond mere small-talk.

✓ **Conversation helps us reach non-Christians.**

Some of the people God is counting on us to reach with the gospel can be found only at the non-church events we attend. We reach these non-churchgoers mainly by conversing with them in a way that shows our interest in who they are and what they care most about. We reach them by making conversation with them.

"Go into all the world and proclaim the good news ..."
—Mark 16:15

A skill that's important for all of us

Making conversation, therefore, isn't just a skill that's needed only by people who want to shine in social or business circles.



It's an important part of helping our churches to be faithful and effective, and of obeying Jesus' commandment to love. ❖

Doing what comes naturally may not serve the purpose



My failure to see the importance of making conversation, I've realized in recent years, came partly from my tendency (which may come from in-born personality traits) merely to watch, listen, and analyze what happens around me, rather than taking part in it. Like many other introverts, I usually react to what I see, hear, or feel by thinking about it before saying anything. Extroverts are more likely to react immediately and openly. In fact, they often think out loud, by talking.



Each way has its advantages and disadvantages. An extrovert may be more likely than an introvert to put his foot in his mouth by spurring out something inappropriate or talking too much, but he's also more likely to have his abilities and feelings appreciated and to be a real part of the groups he's in. Introverts often are still thinking about what to say and how to say it when the chance to say it is past.

Even participating actively in conversations doesn't come easily and naturally for us, however, we often need to do it deliberately in order to let others know we care about them.

Talking is sometimes unwelcome

Doing all the talking is just as unhelpful as not doing any of it, of course, and for some people in some circumstances, even a little talking is too much. When I'm happily reading an interesting book or listening to a speaker or program that I want to hear, being talked to is annoying. When I'm tired, worried, scared, ill, or under time pressure,



Responding is important

In conversation, letting the other person know that he/she has your full attention is important. Above all, that requires looking at the person and temporarily stopping whatever else you're doing. It also requires making frequent responses that communicate attention—nods, changing facial expressions, and little comments like "unh-hunh" and "yes!" and "I see."



Hmmm ...
I see ...
Yes ...

Responses say, "I hear. I understand. I care."

Making these responses is important because they assure your conversation partner that you are hearing and understanding what she is saying, and that you care. Researchers have found that many women make such responses often during conversation, while men are more likely to make none. Just as with other behaviors that communicate caring but aren't automatic for everyone, those of us for whom this kind of responses don't come naturally need to make a conscious effort to include them in our conversations.



The conversational ball game



Conversing is like playing catch. One person has the ball at first, then she throws it to someone else. He throws it to someone else in the group, or back to the first person if it's a two-person game.



Having a game depends on keeping the ball going back and forth. The game can't continue if anyone fails to throw the ball to someone else after receiving it. The game stops, too, if someone doesn't even try to catch the ball when it is tossed to her, or if she just lays it down and walks away. That feels like a slap in the face to the other person, who thought he was still in a game.



Conversations work the same way. To convey interest and kindness to the other participants, we each have to do our part to keep the conversation going.

having to make small-talk or even to listen to it is stressful. So besides taking responsibility for talking, we also need to recognize when not to talk.



That's evidently hard for people who are naturally talkative and strongly people-oriented. They seem to feel that being silent is never desirable, and that failing to talk to whoever is nearby will hurt the other person's feelings or will be seen as failing to help when help is needed. People who must unwillingly spend most of their time alone also may have a hard time seeing any need for silence, because the times when they're with others are so rare and so welcome.

Even though talk is unwelcome in some circumstances, however, a big reason for having parties, meetings, dinners, and other such gatherings is to have conversation with the other attendees. So at these events we can assume that anyone who wanted to avoid conversation wouldn't have come.



A skill that we can acquire

Making conversation isn't just a knack that we're either born with or destined to live without. It's a skill that we can acquire. And it's an important one for Christians to acquire and use. ❖

Some helpful tactics

Knowing some ways of starting conversations and keeping them going can help.

- With someone you don't know, introduce yourself and give some information that will help the other person talk with you—"I'm Barbara Wendland from Temple, Texas, and I'm at this writers' conference because I write a monthly newsletter."
- Follow up on every clue the other person gives—"Tell me about your newsletter. What kind of organization do you write it for?" Ask what led the person to do what she/he is currently doing, or to become interested in the interest he/she mentions—"How did you happen to start a newsletter like that?" Pursue every bit of information that the other person reveals. Keep asking questions.
- If the person gives you no clues, ask something like, "How do you spend your time when you're not at meetings like this one?" or "What's the best thing that's happened to you this week?"

- Keep doing your share by revealing some of your own views, feelings, activities, and interests.



What's really important?

Even using tactics like these, I find it hard to converse with people whose only interests seem to be things that happen to leave me cold. For many men I know, it's business, football, and golf. With some women it's shopping, bridge, and husbands, children, and grandchildren. People with these interests probably have the same difficulty in talking with me when they find that mine include oddities like opera, theology, and cryptic crossword puzzles! Talking with people whose daily activities and background of experience are quite different from mine, or who are physically or mentally unable to talk easily, is hard for me, too.

But at church gatherings, how important is this problem? After all, the church isn't meant to be a mere social club for people who have a lot in common, are able to talk well, and enjoy talking with each other. Maybe conversation isn't what really matters when Christians gather. Maybe all that I've been saying here is wrong.



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