

A GAME PLAN
FOR DISCUSSING YOUR
CHRISTIAN
CONVICTIONS

TACTICS

Foreword by Lee Strobel
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 ZONDERVAN®

CHAPTER ONE

DIPLOMACY OR D-DAY?

APOLOGETICS has a questionable reputation among non-aficionados. By definition, apologists *defend* the faith. They *defeat* false ideas. They *destroy* speculations raised up against the knowledge of God.

Those sound like fightin' words to many people: Circle the wagons. Hoist the drawbridge. Fix bayonets. Load weapons. Ready, aim, fire. It's not surprising, then, that believers and unbelievers alike associate apologetics with conflict. Defenders don't dialogue. They fight.

In addition to the image problem, apologists face another barrier. The truth is that effective persuasion in the twenty-first century requires more than having the right answers. It's too easy for postmoderns to ignore our facts, deny our claims, or simply yawn and walk away from the line we have drawn in the sand.

But sometimes they don't walk away. Instead, they stand and fight. We wade into battle only to face a barrage we can't handle. We have ignored one of the first rules of engagement: Never make a frontal assault on a superior force. Caught off balance, we tuck our tails between our legs and retreat — maybe for good.

I'd like to suggest a "more excellent way." Jesus said that when you find yourself as a sheep amidst wolves, be innocent, but shrewd (Matthew 10:16). Even though there is real warfare going on,¹ our engagements should look more like diplomacy than D-Day.

In this book I would like to teach you how to be diplomatic. I want to suggest a method I call the Ambassador Model. This approach trades more on friendly curiosity — a kind of relaxed diplomacy — than on confrontation.

Now I know that people have different emotional reactions to the idea of engaging others in controversial conversation. Some relish the encounter. Others are willing, but a bit nervous and uncertain. Still others try to avoid it entirely. What about you?

Wherever you find yourself on this scale, I want to help. If you're like a lot of people who pick up a book like this, you would like to make a difference for the kingdom, but you are not sure how to begin. I want to give you a game plan, a strategy to get involved in a way you never thought you could, yet with a tremendous margin of safety.

I am going to teach you how to navigate in conversations so that you stay in control — in a good way — even though your knowledge is limited. You may know nothing about answering challenges people raise against what you believe. You may even be a brand new Christian. It doesn't matter. I am going to introduce you to a handful of effective maneuvers — I call them tactics — that will help you stay in control.

Let me give you an example of what I mean.

THE WITCH IN WISCONSIN

Several years ago while on vacation at our family cabin in Wisconsin, my wife and I stopped at the one-hour photo in town. I noticed that the woman helping us had a large pentagram, a five-pointed star generally associated with the occult, dangling from her neck.

"Does that star have religious significance," I asked, pointing to the pendant, "or is it just jewelry?"

"Yes, it has religious significance," she answered. "The five points stand for earth, wind, fire, water, and spirit." Then she added, "I'm a pagan."

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My wife, caught off guard by the woman's candor, couldn't suppress a laugh, then quickly apologized. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be rude. It's just that I have never heard anyone actually admit right out that they were pagan," she explained. She knew the term only as a pejorative used by her friends yelling at their kids: "Get in here, you bunch of pagans!"

"So you're Wiccan?" I continued.

She nodded. Yes, she was a witch. "It's an Earth religion," the woman explained, "like the Native Americans. We respect all life."

"If you respect all life," I said, "then I suppose you're pro-life on the abortion issue."

She shook her head. "No, actually I'm not. I'm pro-choice."

I was surprised. "Isn't that an unusual position for someone in Wicca to take, I mean, since you're committed to respecting all life?"

"You're right. It is odd," she admitted, then quickly qualified herself. "I know I could never do that. I mean, I could never kill a baby. I wouldn't do anything to hurt anyone else because it might come back on me."

Now this was a remarkable turn in the conversation for two reasons. First, notice the words she used to describe abortion. By her own admission, abortion was baby killing. The phrase wasn't a rhetorical flourish of mine; these were her own words. I did not have to persuade her that abortion took the life of an innocent human being. She already knew it.

She had just offered me a tremendous leg up in the discussion, and I was not going to turn it down. From then on I abandoned the word "abortion;" it would be "baby killing" instead.

Second, I thought it remarkable that her first reason for not hurting a defenseless child was self-interest — something bad might befall *her*. *Is that the best she could do?* I thought to myself. This comment itself was worth pursuing, but I ignored it and took a different tack.

"Well, maybe *you* wouldn't do anything to hurt a baby, but other people would," I countered. "Shouldn't we do something to stop *them* from killing babies?"

"I think women should have a choice," she countered without thinking.

Now, generally statements like "women should have a choice" are meaningless as they stand. Like the statement, "I have a right to take ...," the claim requires an object. Choose ... what? Take ... what? No one has an open-ended right to choose. People only have the right to choose particular things. Whether anyone has a right to choose depends entirely on what choice they have in mind.

In this case, though, there was no ambiguity. The woman had already identified the choice: baby killing, to use her words. Even though she personally respected all life, including human life, this was not a belief she was comfortable "forcing" on others. Women should still have the choice to kill their own babies. That was her view.

Of course, she did not put it in so many words. This was her view *implicitly*.

When bizarre ideas like these are obviously implied, do not let them lurk in the shadows. Drag them into the light with a request for clarification. That is exactly what I did next.

"Do you mean women should have the choice to kill their own babies?"

"Well..." She thought for a moment. "I think all things should be taken into consideration on this question."

"Okay, tell me: What kind of considerations would make it all right to kill a baby?"

"Incest," she answered quickly.

"Hmm. Let me see if I understand. Let's just say I had a two-year-old child standing next to me who had been conceived as a result of incest. On your view, it seems, I should have the liberty to kill her. Is that right?"

This last question stopped her in her tracks. The notion was clearly absurd. It was also clear that she was deeply committed to her pro-choice views. She had no snappy response and had to pause for a moment and think. Finally, she said, "I'd have mixed feelings about that." It was the best she could do.

Of course, she meant this as a concession, but it was a desperately weak response ("Killing a two-year-old? Gee, you got me on that one. I'll have to think about it.")

"I hope so," was all I had the heart to say in response.

At this point I noticed a line of would-be customers forming behind me. Our conversation was now interfering with her work. It was time to abandon the pursuit. My wife and I finished our transaction, wished her well, and departed.

Beware when rhetoric becomes a substitute for substance. You always know that a person has a weak position when he tries to accomplish with the clever use of words what argument alone cannot do.

I want you to notice a few things about this short encounter. First, there was no tension, no anxiety, and no awkwardness in the exchange. There was no confrontation, no defensiveness, and no discomfort. The discussion flowed easily and naturally.

Second, even so, I was completely in control of the conversation. I did this by using three important tactics, maneuvers I will explain in greater detail later in the book, to probe the young woman's ideas and begin to question her faulty thinking.

To start with, I asked seven specific questions. I used these questions to begin the conversation ("Does that star have religious significance or is it just jewelry?") and to gain information from her ("So you're Wiccan?"). I then used questions to expose what I thought were weaknesses in how she responded ("Do you mean women should have the choice to kill their own babies?").

I also gently challenged the inconsistent and contradictory nature of her views. On the one hand, she was a witch who respected all life. On the other hand, she was pro-choice on abortion, a procedure she characterized as "killing babies."

Finally, I tried to help her see the logical consequences of her beliefs. For her, incest was a legitimate reason to kill a baby. But

when presented with a toddler conceived through incest, she balked. It had never occurred to her that, in her view, incest would be a legitimate reason to kill a two-year-old, and that gave her pause.

The third thing I want you to notice about our conversation is very important: The witch from Wisconsin was doing most of the work. The only real effort on my part was to pay attention to her responses and then steer the exchange in the direction I wanted it to go. That was not hard at all.

This is the value of using a tactical approach: staying in the driver's seat in conversations so you can productively direct the discussion, exposing faulty thinking and suggesting more fruitful alternatives along the way.

Regardless of your present capabilities, you can maneuver almost effortlessly in conversations just like I did if you learn the material in this book. I have taught these concepts to thousands of people like you and equipped them with the confidence and ability to have meaningful, productive conversations about spiritual things.

You *can* become an effective ambassador for Christ. It only requires that you pay attention to the guidelines in the chapters that follow and then begin to apply what you have learned.

TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY AMBASSADORS

Representing Christ in the new millennium requires three basic skills. First, Christ's ambassadors need the basic *knowledge* necessary for the task. They must know the central message of God's kingdom and something about how to respond to the obstacles they'll encounter on their diplomatic mission.

However, it is not enough for followers of Jesus to have an accurately informed mind. Our knowledge must be tempered with the kind of *wisdom* that makes our message clear and persuasive. This requires the tools of a diplomat, not the weapons of a warrior, tactical skill rather than brute force.

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Finally, our *character* can make or break our mission. Knowledge and wisdom are packaged in a person, so to speak. If that person does not embody the virtues of the kingdom he serves, he will undermine his message and handicap his efforts.

These three skills—knowledge, an accurately informed mind; wisdom, an artful method; and character, an attractive manner—play a part in every effective involvement with a non-believer. The second skill, tactical wisdom, is the main focus of this book.

Let's look at it another way. There is a difference between strategy and tactics. Strategy involves the big picture, the large-scale operation, one's positioning prior to engagement. We can apply this concept to our situation as Christians. As followers of Jesus, we have tremendous strategic superiority. We are well "positioned" on the field because of the content of our ideas. Our beliefs hold up well under serious scrutiny, especially considering the alternative views.

This strategic advantage includes two areas. The first, called "offensive apologetics," makes a positive case for Christianity by offering, for example, evidence for the existence of God, for the resurrection of Christ, or for the Christian faith through fulfilled prophecy. The second area, often called "defensive apologetics," answers challenges to Christianity like the attacks on the authority and reliability of the Bible, answering the problem of evil, or dealing with Darwinian macro-evolution, to name a few.²

Notice that in the way I am using the term, the "strategic" element focuses on content. Virtually every book ever written on defending the faith takes this approach. Faithful Christian authors have filled bookshelves with enough information to deal with every imaginable challenge to classical Christianity. Still, many Christians have an inferiority complex. Why? Maybe they have never been exposed to such excellent information. As a result, they are lacking the first skill of a good ambassador: knowledge.

But I think there is another reason. Something is still missing. A sharp lawyer needs more than facts to make his case in court. He

needs to know how to use his knowledge well. In the same way, we need a plan to artfully manage the details of dialogues we have with others. This is where tactics come in.

TACTICS: THE MISSING PIECE OF THE PUZZLE

In World War II, the Allied forces had a strategic plan for gaining a foothold in the European continent. The Normandy invasion, code-named "Operation Overlord," involved a simultaneous attack on five beaches — Utah, Omaha, Gold, Juno, and Sword — on June 6, 1944, also known as D-Day.

No strategy, however brilliant, can win a war. The devil, as they say, is in the details. Individual soldiers must hit the beach and engage, deploying assets and destroying obstacles to gain an advantage, dodging bullets all the while.

Though we are following a diplomatic model and not a military one, the military metaphor is still helpful to distinguish strategy from tactics. Tactics, literally "the art of arranging," focus on the immediate situation at hand. They involve the orderly hands-on choreography of the particulars. Often a clever commander can gain the advantage over a larger force with superior strength or numbers through deft tactical maneuvering.

I think you can see the parallel for you as a Christian. You may have personal experience with how the gospel can change someone's life, but how do you design particular responses to particular people so you can begin to have an impact in specific situations?

Tactics can help because they offer techniques of maneuvering in what otherwise might be difficult conversations. They guide you in arranging your own resources in an artful way. They suggest approaches that anyone can use to be more persuasive, in part because they help you be more reasonable and thoughtful — instead of just emotional — about your convictions as a follower of Christ.

The tactical approach requires as much careful listening as thoughtful response. You have to be alert and pay attention so you

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can adapt to new information. This method resembles one-on-one basketball more than a game of chess. There are plans being played out, but there is constant motion and adjustment.

I have all kinds of odd names for these tactics to help you remember what they are and how they work—names like Columbo; Suicide; Taking the Roof Off; Rhodes Scholar; Just the Facts, Ma'am; and Steamroller. Some you initiate; others you use for self-protection.

In the pages that follow, you will encounter real-life examples and samples of dialogues where I use a tactical approach to address common objections, complaints, or assertions raised against the convictions you and I hold as followers of Jesus. But there is a danger I want you to be aware of, so I need to pause and make an important clarification.

Tactics are not manipulative tricks or slick ruses. They are not clever ploys to embarrass other people and force them to submit to your point of view. They are not meant to belittle or humiliate those who disagree so you can gain notches in your spiritual belt.

It is not the Christian life to wound, embarrass, or play one-upmanship with colleagues, friends, or even opponents, but it's a common vice that anyone can easily fall into. — Hugh Hewitt³

I offer this warning for two reasons.

First, these tactics are powerful and can be abused. It's not difficult to make someone look silly when you master these techniques. A tactical approach can quickly show people how foolish some of their ideas are. Therefore, you must be careful not to use your tactics merely to assault others.⁴

Second, the illustrations in this book are abbreviated accounts of encounters I have actually had. In the retelling, I may appear more harsh or aggressive than I was in real life. I am not opposed to being assertive, direct, or challenging. However, I never intend to be abrasive or abusive.

My goal, rather, is to find clever ways to exploit someone's bad thinking for the purpose of guiding her to truth, yet remaining gracious and charitable at the same time. My aim is to manage, not manipulate; to control, not coerce; to finesse, not fight. I want the same for you.

If you are a little nervous about the prospect of talking to people outside the safety of your Christian circles, let me offer you a word of encouragement. I have been engaging challengers and critics in the marketplace of ideas for more than three decades. The people I talk with — atheists, cultists, skeptics, and secularists of every description — all oppose evangelical Christian views, sometimes vigorously and belligerently. Often they are very smart people.

To be candid, this concerned me at first. I wasn't sure how the ideas I'd learned in the safety of my study would fare against the smart guys in public with thousands of people watching or listening. What I discovered in the crucible, though, was that facts and sound reason are on our side. Most people, even the smart ones, don't give much thought to their opposition of Christianity. How do I know? I have listened to their objections.

You don't have to be frightened of the truth or of the adversaries. Take your time, do your homework, think through the issues. If Christianity is the truth, no matter how convincing the other side sounds at first, there will always be a fly in the ointment somewhere — a mistake in thinking, a wayward "fact," an unjustified conclusion. Keep looking for it. Sooner or later it will show up. Many times the right tactic will help you discover that flaw and show it for the error it is.

There is an art to this process, and learning any craft takes time and a little focused effort. It takes practice to turn a potentially volatile situation into an opportunity. If you learn the tactics in this book, though, I promise that you will get better at presenting the truth clearly — and sometimes even cleverly. I will guide you, step by step, through a game plan that will help you maneuver comfortably and graciously in conversations about your Christian convictions and values.

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If you are an attentive student, in a very short time you will develop the art of maintaining appropriate control — what I call "staying in the driver's seat" — in discussions with others. You will learn how to navigate through the minefields to gain a footing or an advantage in conversations. In short, you will be learning to be a better diplomat — an ambassador for Jesus Christ.

WHAT WE LEARNED IN THIS CHAPTER

First, we learned the value of using the tactical approach when discussing Christianity. Tactics help you control the conversation by getting you into the driver's seat and keeping you there. Tactics also help you maneuver effectively in the midst of disagreement so that your engagements seem more like diplomacy than combat.

Second, we defined tactics and distinguished them from strategy. Strategy involves the big picture, which in our case means the content, information, and reasons why someone should believe Christianity is true. Tactics, on the other hand, involve the details of the engagement, the art of navigating through the conversation itself.

Third, we learned about the dangers of using tactics. Tactics are not tricks, slick ruses, or clever ploys that belittle or humiliate the other person. Instead, tactics are used to gain a footing, to maneuver, and to expose another person's bad thinking so you can guide him to truth.

Before we get into the details though, I would like to address a couple of possible reservations you may have.

CHAPTER TWO

RESERVATIONS

I have just made you a promise. I said that if you learn the tactics in this book, you will be able to comfortably engage in thoughtful conversations with others about your Christian convictions. At this point, though, you may have some reservations.

For one, trying to make your case with another person, even if done carefully, brings you dangerously close to having an argument. Some people think anything that looks like an argument should be avoided.

In one sense you'd be right. Squabbling, bickering, and quarreling are not very attractive, and they rarely produce anything good. With these types of caustic disputes, I have a general rule: If anyone in the discussion gets angry, you lose.

Here's what I mean. When you get angry, you look belligerent. You raise your voice, you scowl. You may even begin to break into the conversation before the other person is finished. Not only is this bad manners, but it begins to look like your ideas are not as good as you thought they were. Now you must resort to interruption and intimidation. You begin to replace persuasion with power. This is not a good strategy. It is never really convincing, even if you are successful in bullying the other person into silence.

What if you are able to keep your cool, but the person you're trying to persuade isn't? You lose in that case, too. People who are angry get defensive, and defensive people are not in a very good

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Always make it a goal to keep your conversations cordial. Sometimes that will not be possible. If a principled, charitable expression of your ideas makes someone mad, there's little you can do about it. Jesus' teaching made some people furious. Just make sure it's your **ideas** that offend and not **you**, that your **beliefs** cause the dispute and not your **behavior**.

It's good to avoid quarrels. Indeed, the apostle Paul tells us quite clearly that as the Lord's representatives, we must not be the kind of people who are looking for a fight. Rather, we're to be kind, patient, and gentle toward our opposition.¹

There is another sense, though, in which arguments should not be avoided. I realize that for some people even a cordial defense of things like religious or moral views seems in bad taste. It sounds too judgmental and smacks of narrow-mindedness, even arrogance.

This is unfortunate. Let me try to explain why this second kind of arguing — contending in a principled way for something that really matters — is actually a good thing.

ARGUING IS A VIRTUE

Imagine living in a world in which you couldn't distinguish between truth and error. You would not be able to tell food from poison or friend from foe. You could not tell good from bad, right from wrong, healthy from unhealthy, or safe from unsafe. Such a world would be a dangerous place. You wouldn't survive long.

What protects us from the hazards of such a world? If you're a Christian, you might be tempted to say, "The Word of God protects

us." Certainly, that's true, but the person who says that might be missing something else God has given us that is also vitally important. In fact, God's Word would be useless without it.

A different thing is necessary before we can accurately know what God is saying through his Word. Yes, the Bible is first in terms of *authority*, but something else is first in terms of the order of knowing: We cannot grasp the authoritative teaching of God's Word unless we use our minds properly. *Therefore the mind, not the Bible, is the very first line of defense God has given us against error.*

The mind, not the Bible, is the very first line of defense God has given us against error.

For some of you this may be a controversial statement, so let's think about it for a moment. In order to understand the truth of the Bible accurately, our mental faculties must be intact and we must use them as God intended. We demonstrate this fact every time we disagree on an interpretation of a biblical passage and then give reasons why our view is better than another's. Simply put, we *argue* for our point of view, and if we argue well, we separate wheat from chaff, truth from error.

Jesus said, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength" (Mark 12:30). Loving God with the mind is not a passive process. It is not enough to have sentimental religious thoughts. Rather, it involves coming to conclusions about God and his world based on revelation, observation, and careful reflection.

What is the tool we use in our observations of the world that helps us separate fact from fiction? That tool is reason, the ability to use our minds to sort through observations and draw accurate conclusions about reality. Rationality is one of the tools God has given us to acquire knowledge.

Generally, sorting things out is not a solitary enterprise. It's best done in the company of others who dispute our claims and offer competing ideas. In short, we argue. Sometimes we are silent

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The ability to argue well is vital for clear thinking. That's why arguments are good things. Arguing is a virtue because it helps us determine what is true and discard what is false.

This is not rationalism, a kind of idolatry of the mind that places man's thinking at the center of the universe. Rather, it's the proper use of one of the faculties God has given us to understand him and the world he has made.

FIGHT PHOBIC

If the notion of truth is central to Christianity, and the ability to argue is central to the task of knowing the truth, why do some Christians get upset when you try to find the truth through argument and disagreement? Two things come to mind that are especially applicable to those in a Christian setting, usually a church environment.

First, some fear division. When people are free to express strong differences of opinion, especially on theological issues, it threatens unity, they say. Consequently, the minute a disagreement surfaces, someone jumps in to shut down dissent in order to keep the peace. This is unfortunate.

True enough, Christians sometimes get distracted by useless disputes. Paul warns against wrangling about words and quarreling about foolish speculations (2 Timothy 2:14, 23). But he also commands us to be diligent workmen, handling the word of truth accurately (2 Timothy 2:15). And, because some disputes are vitally important, Paul solemnly charges us to reprove, rebuke, and exhort when necessary (2 Timothy 4:1 - 2). This cannot be done without some confrontation, but disagreement need not threaten genuine unity.

To be of one mind biblically doesn't mean that all have to share the same opinion. It means a warm fellowship based on communion with Christ in the midst of differences. It does not mean abandoning all attempts at refining our knowledge by enforcing an artificial unanimity. True maturity means learning how to disagree in an aggressive fashion, yet still maintaining a peaceful harmony in the church.

There's a second reason why Christians resist arguments. Some believers unfortunately take any opposition as hostility, especially if their own view is being challenged. In some circles it's virtually impossible to take exception to a cherished view or a respected teacher without being labeled malicious.

This is a dangerous attitude for the church because the minute one is labeled mean-spirited simply for raising an opposing view, debate is silenced. If we disqualify legitimate discussion, we compromise our ability to know the truth.

It is important not to deal with dissent in this way. Instead, we ought to learn how to argue in a principled way — fairly, reasonably, and graciously. We need to cultivate the ability to disagree with civility and not take opposition personally. We must also have the grace to allow our own views to be challenged with evidence, reasoning, and Scripture. Those who refuse to dispute have a poor chance of growing in their understanding of truth.

There is no reason to threaten our unity by frivolous debate. However, many debates are worthy of our best efforts. Paul told Timothy, "Retain the standard of sound words," and "Guard ... the treasure which has been entrusted to you" (2 Timothy 1:13–14). He told Titus to choose elders who could exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict, false teachers, he said, who must be silenced (Titus 1:9, 11). This kind of protection of truth is not a passive enterprise. It's active and energetic.

Arguments are good, and dispute is healthy. They clarify the truth and protect us from error and religious despotism. When the church discourages principled debates and a free flow of ideas, the result is shallow Christianity and a false sense of unity.

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No one gets any practice learning how to field contrary views in a gracious and productive way. The oneness they share is contrived, not genuine. Worse, they lose the ability to separate the wheat from the chaff. Simply put, when arguments are few, error abounds.

DO ARGUMENTS WORK?

Now I want to address another question: Do arguments work? The simple answer is, "Yes, they do," but this needs explanation.

Some suspect that using reason isn't spiritual. "After all, you can't argue anyone into the kingdom," they say. "Only the Spirit can change a rebel's heart. Jesus was clear on this. No one can come to him unless the Father draws him (John 6:44). No intellectual argument could ever substitute for the act of sovereign grace necessary for sinners to come to their senses."

Of course, this last statement is entirely true as far as it goes. The problem is, it does not go far enough. There is more to the story. It doesn't follow that if God's Spirit plays a vital role, then reason and persuasion play none. In the apostle Paul's mind there was no conflict.

And according to Paul's custom, he went to them, and for three Sabbaths reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and giving evidence that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead.... And some of them were persuaded. (Acts 17:2-4, italics added)

There are many more verses like this.² You might also be able to think of examples from your own life where taking a thoughtful approach with someone made a big difference in his response, maybe even a decisive difference.

Simply put, you *can* argue someone into the kingdom. It happens all the time. But when arguments are effective, they are not working in a vacuum.

When people say you can't argue anyone into the kingdom, they usually have an alternative approach in mind. They might be thinking that a genuine expression of love, kindness, and acceptance, coupled with a simple presentation of the gospel, is a more biblical approach.

If you are tempted to think this way, let me say something that may shock you: *You cannot love someone into the kingdom.* It can't be done. In fact, the simple gospel itself is not even adequate to do that job.

How do I know? Because many people who were treated with sacrificial love and kindness by Christians never surrendered to the Savior. Many who have heard a clear explanation of God's gift in Christ never put their trust in him.

In each case something was missing that, when present, always results in conversion. What's missing is that special work of the Father that Jesus referred to, drawing a lost soul into his arms (John 6:44). Of this work Jesus also said, "Of all that He has given Me I lose nothing, but raise it up on the last day" (John 6:39).

According to Jesus, then, two things are true. First, there is a particular work of God that is necessary to bring someone into the kingdom. Second, when present, this work cannot fail to accomplish its goal. Without the work of the Spirit, no argument — no matter how persuasive — will be effective. But neither will any act of love nor any simple presentation of the gospel. Add the Spirit, though, and the equation changes dramatically.

Here's the key principle: *Without God's work, nothing else works; but with God's work, many things work.* Under the influence of the Holy Spirit, love persuades. By the power of God, the gospel transforms. And with Jesus at work, arguments convince. God is happy to use each of these methods.

Why do you think God is just as pleased to use a good argument as a warm expression of love? Because both love and reason are consistent with God's own character. The same God who is the essence of love³ also gave the invitation, "Come now, and let us reason together."⁴ Therefore, both approaches honor him.

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Understanding this truth makes our job as ambassadors much easier. We can be confident that every time we engage, we have an ally. Our job is to communicate the gospel as clearly, graciously, and persuasively as possible. God's job is to take it from there. We may plant the seeds or water the saplings, but God causes whatever increase comes from our efforts.⁵

We are not in this alone. Yes, each of us has an important role to play, but all the pressure is on the Lord. Sharing the gospel is our task, but it's God's problem.

I like to call this principle "100% God and 100% man." I am wholly responsible for my side of the ledger, and God is entirely responsible for his. I focus on being faithful, but I trust God to be effective. Some will respond, and some will not. The results are his concern, not mine. This lifts a tremendous burden from my shoulders.

When I was a young Christian, the wife of my mentor gave me some solid advice from John 10. In this chapter Jesus uses a "figure of speech" (v. 6) to describe the work of the Holy Spirit drawing someone to Christ. "My sheep hear My voice," Jesus said. "I know them, and they follow Me; and I give eternal life to them, and they shall never perish" (John 10:27–28).

This has very practical application for evangelism because it helps explain something you might have encountered in conversations with others. Have you ever noticed that sometimes your comments seem to fall on deaf ears, yet at other times they seem profitable?

"When I share my faith," Kathy told me, "I pay attention to how the 'sheep' respond. Most will keep on eating grass. But once in a while you'll notice that some lift their heads. There is a moment of recognition as they 'hear' the Shepherd's 'voice.'"

Kathy understood that it was Jesus' job to change the heart. Since she was confident the Holy Spirit was going before her, she

was simply looking for the people who were looking for her, so to speak. She was looking for those already hungry for the gospel, those whose hearts were already being softened by the Spirit. Those were the people she spent her time on. She left the rest alone.⁶

A MODEST GOAL

My confidence that God is responsible for the results helps me in another way. Since I know I play only one part in a larger process of bringing anyone to the Lord, I'm comfortable taking smaller steps toward that end.

It may surprise you to hear this, but I never set out to convert anyone. My aim is never to win someone to Christ. I have a more modest goal, one you might consider adopting as your own. *All I want to do is put a stone in someone's shoe.* I want to give him something worth thinking about, something he can't ignore because it continues to poke at him in a good way.

When a batter gets up to the plate, his goal isn't to win the ball game. That's an extended process that takes a team effort. He just wants a chance to get a hit. If he connects, he might get on base and into scoring position. Or he may drive another batter home, even if he never makes it to first. In the same way, I never try to hit the winning run. I just want to get up to bat. That's all.

In some circles there's pressure for Christian ambassadors to "close the sale," so to speak. Get right to the meat of the message. Give the simple gospel. If the person doesn't respond, you have still done your part. Shake the dust off your feet and move on. In my view, though, you don't have to get to the foot of the cross in every encounter. You don't have to try to close every deal. I have two reasons for this view.

First, not all Christians are good closers. Yes, some are effective at getting the decision. For those with that gift, harvesting takes little effort. Nothing fancy is required; the simple gospel does the trick. Yet I am convinced that most Christians—includ-

ing me—are not harvesters. Instead of tending the field so others can be harvested, some Christians, aware of their discouragement and never getting into the field, then you need to know it's okay. In fact, there'd be no harvest at all if harvesting comes easily for some. Harvesters preceded them—planting, watching, and waiting for healthy growth until the fruit was ready.

Here's the second reason that I don't go on a beeline for the cross in every conversation. The fruit is not ripe. The nonbeliever is just begun to consider Christianity. That is, from her point of view, my message doesn't accomplish anything. In fact, it makes her harder to reach than she can do. She rejects a message she's harder to reach next time.

Think of your own journey to Christ. It goes from a standstill to total commitment over a period of time. There's a lot of work sorted out the details.

A few years back, I spoke to a group of students and asked, "How do you understand why he needed to believe? How do you try to build to a point of decision? How do you receive Christ?" Instead, I put a stack of questions to think about. He needed to believe before he'd be ready for a genuine decision to trust Jesus, I wanted it to be a choice that lasted, not an emotional moment that he'd later abandon.

One spring I spoke in San Diego to a group of students in a ballroom in the middle of campus there. Most were not Christians. The attitude on campus was that Christians were like a good opener for my talk.

ing me—are not harvesters. Instead, we are ordinary gardeners, tending the field so others can bring in the crop in due season. Some Christians, aware of their difficulty in harvesting, get discouraged and never get into the field at all. If this describes you, then you need to know it's okay to sow, even if you don't reap. In fact, there'd be no harvest at all without you. Ironically, I think harvesting comes easily for some because many ordinary gardeners preceded them—planting, watering, and weeding, cultivating healthy growth until the fruit was ripe.

Here's the second reason that I do not think it wise to make a beeline for the cross in every conversation: In most situations, the fruit is not ripe. The nonbeliever is simply not ready. She may have just begun to consider Christianity. Dropping a message on her that is, from her point of view, meaningless or simply unbelievable doesn't accomplish anything. In fact, it may be the worst thing you can do. She rejects a message she doesn't understand, and then she's harder to reach next time.

Think of your own journey to Christ. Chances are you didn't go from a standstill to total commitment. Instead, God dealt with you over a period of time. There was a period of reflection as you sorted out the details.

A few years back, I spoke to a Jewish attorney who didn't understand why he needed to believe in Jesus. In his case, I didn't try to build to a point of decision where I asked, "Do you want to receive Christ?" Instead, I put a stone in his shoe. I gave him two questions to think about. He needed to digest vital information before he'd be ready for a genuine commitment. If he ever made a decision to trust Jesus, I wanted it to be informed and thoughtful, a choice that lasted, not an emotional reaction made in the heat of the moment that he'd later abandon.

One spring I spoke in San Diego to an audience of four hundred students in a ballroom in the middle of the University of California campus there. Most were not Christians. I'd heard that the general attitude on campus was that Christians were stupid. That sounded like a good opener for my talk.

"I understand many of you think Christians are stupid," I said to the audience. "Well, many of them are," I admitted. "But many non-Christians are stupid, too, so I don't know how that helps you. What I want to do this evening is show you that *Christianity* is not stupid."

Then I shared with them my modest goal. "I'm not here to convert you tonight," I said. "Instead, I want to put a stone in your shoe." After that, I lectured on the failure of relativism. I wasn't there to close the sale. I just wanted to give them something to think about.

As it turned out, while taking questions from the audience afterward I was able to give more detail about the gospel, but only after I had laid the groundwork by making the message not only sensible to them, but reasonable. I took one step at a time.

I encourage you to consider the strategy I use when God opens a door of opportunity for me. I pray quickly for wisdom, then ask myself this: What one thing can I say in this circumstance, what one question can I ask, what seed can I plant that will get the other person thinking? Then I simply try to put a stone in the person's shoe.

WHAT WE LEARNED IN THIS CHAPTER

I opened this chapter by addressing a handful of reservations you might have about developing your tactical skill as an ambassador. There is a difference between an argument and a fight. Unfriendly quarrels are not productive. If *anyone* in the conversation gets mad, then *you* lose. Arguments, on the other hand, are good things. Indeed, arguing is a virtue, because it advances clear thinking. If done well, it helps refine our understanding of truth.

When Christians avoid principled conflict on things that matter because of fear of disunity and division, they cripple the church in three ways. First, Scripture commands that we guard the truth

within our ranks; where argument is used, believers are denied the opportunity to argue among themselves in a fair, rational way. Second, the outcome for fight-phobics is not a victory, but a contrived unanimity, a false sense of unity.

For those who are tempted to use argument and evidence is not spiritual battle. If you have a willful heart, I made two observations. First, if you have a willful heart, nothing else will work—the simple gospel. Second, we are not pleased to use many things. Learning to listen to him because both are necessary. Third, with God's help, argument is not a sin. Peter used them, and Paul used them.

Understanding God's call is a tremendous burden. We cannot ignore it, and it is not a burden. It is called "100% God and 100% man." We are looking for us, in a sense being touched by the Spirit. We need to hear Jesus' "voice" and lift up our voices to those who are not yet ready.

Finally, I encouraged you to be patient in your encounters that I have found. The cross is in every encounter. Do not put a stone in the person's shoe. Try to give the person something to think about. Plant a seed that might later bear fruit.

within our ranks; where arguments are few, error abounds. Second, believers are denied the opportunity to learn how to argue among themselves in a fair, reasonable, and gracious way. Third, the outcome for fight-phobic churches is not genuine oneness, but a contrived unanimity, a shallow and artificial peace.

For those who are tempted to think that presenting arguments and evidence is not spiritual because only God can change a rebellious heart, I made two observations. First, without the work of God, nothing else will work—not arguments, not love, not even the simple gospel. Second, with the help of the Holy Spirit, God is pleased to use many things. Love and reason are especially appealing to him because both are consistent with his nature. The fact is, with God's help, arguments work all the time. Jesus used them, Peter used them, and Paul used them—all to great effect.

Understanding God's central role in the process removes a tremendous burden. We can focus on our job—being clear, gracious, and persuasive—and then leave the results to God (what I called "100% God and 100% man"). We're looking for those who are looking for us, in a sense—people whose hearts are already being touched by the Spirit. We can be alert for those sheep that hear Jesus' "voice" and lift their heads, without troubling those who are not yet ready.

Finally, I encouraged you to adopt the modest goal for your encounters that I have found so effective. Instead of trying to get to the cross in every encounter, just aim to put a stone in someone's shoe. Try to give the person something to think about. Be content to plant a seed that might later flourish under God's sovereign care.