

Call to Obedience #232  
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We are not called to be the sugar -- but the salt of the earth.

## **Jesus' Conversational Etiquette**

By Reimar Schultze

### **A Lesson in Soul-winning**

"There was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews: The same came to Jesus by night, and said unto him, Rabbi, we know that thou art a teacher come from God: for no man can do these miracles that thou doest, except God be with him. Jesus answered and said unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God" (John 3:1-3).

Aren't we glad that we have John 3 and 4 where we see Jesus in one-to-one soul-winning discourses? Within these two chapters where Jesus confronts the most religious man, Nicodemus, and the least religious woman, the Samaritan woman, we have the basic principles for any course on personal evangelism.

Let us now pick up on the first most obvious principle of successful soul-winning.

#### **A Soul-winner Is Not Bound by Human Etiquette.**

Indeed, etiquette has its place and value. We should not chew our food with an open mouth. We should not interrupt conversations. We should serve others before we serve ourselves. We should take a crying child out of the church sanctuary during a service; etc....

I am highly in favor of proper etiquette. We need it, and we need much of it. But we must learn that in soul-winning, it is seldom effective to remain within the boundaries of all laws of etiquette. Any soul-winner must know that for the Christian, being socially correct is never to take second place to doing the will of God.

Jesus, in his conversation with Nicodemus, did not allow himself to be deterred by standard conversational etiquette. He did not come to enhance and undergird etiquette, but to seek and to save that which was lost.

#### **The Character of Nicodemus.**

Let us now observe the conversational flow between one of the most prominent religious leaders in Jerusalem and the most prominent figure in divine history.

Nicodemus initiated the visit and the conversation with Jesus. First, it should not be assumed that Nicodemus came to Jesus by night because of his fear of the Jews. More likely, he was a busy man, and this was the first available moment he had to talk to Jesus.

Second, Nicodemus initiated the conversation with these words, "Rabbi, we know that thou art a teacher come from God..." No Pharisee can be found anywhere in the gospels who approached Jesus with nobler words than these.

I like Nicodemus. He was a good man, a discerning man. Without ever having met Jesus, but only hearing of his teachings and miracles, Nicodemus knew that Jesus was from God. Are you that discerning of men of God? Are you able to believe without seeing? Do you go more by the witness of the Holy Spirit than by physical evidence?

Nicodemus was a positive man. He did not say, "I know that thou art a teacher..." but "We know..." He assumed that his observation was that of many, yea, even of his colleagues.

Nicodemus was a logical man, a good thinker: "...no man can do these miracles...except ...," reasoning from effect to cause and vice versa.

Oh, what a wonderful greeting Nicodemus gave Jesus. It includes these lofty phrases, "...come from God," and "...except God be with him." Can you find a finer Pharisee than that?

### **Jesus Responds.**

"Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again..."

Nicodemus was an elder, a well-polished, well-trained scholar coming out of the best educational system extant. Nicodemus had the highest credentials in the holy city, and here this young carpenter, coming out of nowhere, responded to Nicodemus' beautiful introduction with "you must be born again!" In other words, you lack true spirituality; you lack the kingdom of heaven; you are not in it.

Have you ever marvelled at that? Have you ever marvelled that Jesus did not respond to Nicodemus in kind, saying: "Thank you, your honor, and I appreciate your great learning which came to you by great sacrifice. I appreciate the burden of the church you carry upon your shoulders and the insight God has given you, etc...."?

Plainly speaking, Jesus did not reciprocate to Nicodemus' wonderful and uplifting words. Rather, Jesus immediately jolted him into the reality of his own spiritual shortcomings.

Do you always reciprocate when people say nice things about you, telling them how nice they are? Or have you been able to get right down to business, even as Jesus did?

One of the problems in soul-winning is that too many of us simply fail to win souls because we try to do it within the boundaries of social etiquette. The truth we need to hear is that:

### **Social Etiquette Often Serves No Other Purpose than to Make Others and Us Feel Good.**

Soul-winning is not about making us or others feel comfortable. In fact, if you leave a sinner feeling comfortable, he will rarely see his need to change. Salvation is about bringing conviction to the one we are trying to win to Jesus, and being willing to lose our life in the process. Jesus said, "He that loveth his life shall lose it" (see John 12:24,25).

Many soul-winners become prisoners of social etiquette because they don't want to offend the person they are speaking to, and they want to look good enough to that person so that they will have another opportunity to speak to them. Unfortunately, a "good witness" in today's soul-winning classes is a smooth talker who comes out looking good when the witness is done.

There is no doubt that if we look good after witnessing, we will have another chance to witness. The problem is, we generally do not bring the sinner under the conviction which would cause him to cry out, "God, have mercy on me a sinner!"

We have such a fear of offending anyone. But the fact is, an offense often becomes the breeding ground for conviction. Paul says in Romans 9:33, "As it is written, Behold, I lay in Sion a stumblingstone and rock of offence: and whosoever believeth on him shall not be ashamed."

The Greek word employed here for the offense is skandalon from which derives our English word "scandal." This word is applied to Jesus because his person and conduct are so contrary to the ways of the sinner and the Self-life. This causes the sinner to be upset, to stumble, to be disturbed, and then that upset becomes the cause of either the sinner's condemnation if he refuses to change, or it becomes his steppingstone to salvation. Wherever Jesus went, he offended people -- he was scandalous! (see Matt. 11:6, 13:57, 15:12).

Once the gospel ceases to be offensive, scandalous, and upsetting to sinners, it has lost its saving power. The gospel presented under the anointing of the Holy Spirit will never leave a man indifferent.

Now, of course, we are not to seek to offend anyone purposefully -- by no means. Paul admonishes us to "Give none offence, neither to the Jews, nor to the Gentiles, nor to the church of God" (1 Cor. 10:32). But the word "offence" here in Corinthians comes from a different Greek word and has a different context and meaning. What should upset others is not our un-Christlikeness, selfishness, rude and arrogant manners, but only the gospel working in and through us to save to the uttermost. For the gospel to save, it must first bring conviction to enlighten the darkness in the sinner's heart. Therefore, Jesus responds to Nicodemus, not with smooth words of conversational etiquette, but with "you must be born again," repeating it again and again! He follows this with another loving rebuke, "Art thou a master of Israel, and knowest not these things?," followed by another, "If I have told you earthly things, and ye believe not, how shall ye believe, if I tell you of heavenly things?" (vv. 10,12).

Let me ask you: do you think that all this tells us that Jesus was making a great effort to look good when Nicodemus left that night? Tell me now whether Jesus was more concerned about looking good at the end of a witness, or his putting some truth into an unsaved man -- three times over -- that the Holy Spirit could brood upon to make him a believer three years later.

Friend, examine your witness -- your soul-winning approach -- to see if you leave enough gospel truth in the heart of a sinner so the Holy Spirit can draw that sinner to repentance. "He that loveth his life shall lose it." Are you trying to save the sinner, or your reputation when you witness?

So, lesson number one in soul-winning is: do not become a prisoner of human conversational and social etiquette, but speak the truth of God lovingly, yet boldly and clearly, so that it reaches the sinner's heart.

Whenever I have been most effective in soul-winning, it was when I was direct, plain as vanilla and clear as a winter morning.

### **My Testimony on Soul-winning.**

My first convert ever was a university student who came to visit me in the hospital during a 16 month ailment. He was so shy that in the 20 minutes that he was in my hospital room, he could think of nothing to say -- nothing, not a word! I, also being extremely shy, could think of nothing worthy to say except that he needed to get saved. But it took me nearly 20 minutes to finally say: "Kim, you need to go home and give your heart to Jesus." He left in total silence. I did not feel good after having said that. I felt that I had offended him. I felt ashamed for having done such a poor job of talking to him. I thought I would never see him again. (I hadn't learned yet that, generally, all witnessing in the Holy Spirit upsets people. As it was with Jesus and the apostles, so it will be with us.) But Kim went home, knelt down at his bedside and gave his heart to Jesus, and his name was written down in the Lamb's book of life. Didn't I do about the same thing that Jesus did with Nicodemus, saying, "Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born again" (John 3:7)?

I am ashamed (thank God for Jesus' blood that it is not an overwhelming shame nor a condemning shame, but a shame having turned into a driving force to be a better witness for Jesus) -- I am ashamed that, too often, my witness has come short of leaving any convicting word with sinners.

My second convert also was a university student. Still a young Christian, I had never heard of evangelism courses. All I knew to do was read the Word of God every day and pray much, and that if I said nothing to convict the lost, no one in my dormitory would. I knew that I was responsible for every lost soul in my dorm. So, every time Joe came by, I threw a scripture at him -- every time! I used whatever scripture came to mind, such as, "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth." Joe never responded -- he just kept walking on down the

hallway. Every time I spoke, I felt silly, without etiquette. But my burden for the lost and my sense of responsibility for this soul made me do it over and over again until, finally, one day after a few months, he knocked on my door and said, "I want to get saved." We knelt at my bedside where he found Jesus.

Friend, Jesus, in witnessing to Nicodemus, violated the popular laws of conversational etiquette, to follow the one law of heavenly etiquette: to do always the will of God. The end result was that Nicodemus, overnight, became a defender of Jesus in the face of Pharisaical accusations (John 7:50,51), and that three years later, he lovingly took the body of Jesus to prepare it for burial (19:39).

Do not let man's etiquette, manners, traditions, and expectations trap you into "lifeless" and "saltless" witnessing. If your witness does not bring conviction, it will not bring salvation. Remember that Christlikeness is not necessarily being nice, but it is simply doing the will of God. All of this caused Paul to write later on, "But as we were allowed of God to be put in trust with the gospel, even so we speak; not as pleasing men, but God... neither at any time used we flattering words... Nor of men sought we glory..." (1 Thess. 2:4-6).

Yes, Jesus did not call us to be the sugar, but the salt of the earth! Has your salt lost its savor, or is it still the power of God unto salvation?