

Welcome to the dance. If you've ever tried ballroom dancing, you've discovered a simple rule-- someone always has to lead. In our evangelism training, we make ourselves, the gospel-explainers, the leader and the hearer follows by listening. What happens if we reversed the roles and allowed the hearer to lead? What if evangelism started from the listener's point of view?

I love Proverbs 27:14: "If a man loudly blesses his neighbor early in the morning, it will be taken as a curse." A friend rushed into a home with a great message but it was shared in an inappropriate way and at an inappropriate time. The message was delivered but not received. Effective communication delivers messages in ways that are received and understood by the hearers.

How we receive and understand the message is important to God. "Come now, let us reason together (Isaiah 1:18)," is His invitation to the prophet. The first recorded exchanges between God and Adam were all questions: "Where are you?" (Genesis 3:9) "Who told you that you were naked?" (Genesis 3:11) "What is it that you have done?" (Genesis 3:13). God knew the answers to all these questions. Why did He ask them? I believe He was inviting Adam and Eve into a thoughtful conversation with Himself about the answers.

God communicates not to impress or to be admired but to be understood. Mission specialist Charles Kraft writes that He is "careful to bend every effort to meet his [listeners] where they are. He will choose topics that relate to the felt needs of the [hearers] . . . he will use language that is maximally intelligible to them." For communication to happen, the message must make sense to the hearer.

Here's a true story. A friend told me how a co-worker "never realized that Jesus was into banking."

"What do you mean by that," asked my friend.

"I saw a sign that said 'Jesus saves,'" he said.

This seems ridiculous to us but it made perfect sense to the hearer. His reference point was not salvation but finances. Communication failed because it didn't connect with the receiver. A message was delivered but not received.

Take some words that we cherish, "sin," "salvation," or "saved." Consider whether they would make sense to a neighbor or coworker. Are there current everyday words you could substitute? Is there a word-picture or analogy you could create to communicate their meanings?

In the final analysis, we believe that the Holy Spirit gives true understanding. But this doesn't let us off the hook. When we live life2life with our lost friends, we're always asking, "Is my message making sense from his or her point of view?" We must move beyond just delivering the message to helping people understand the message. Let's trust the Holy Spirit to wisely communicate so understanding happens. Eternity hangs in the balance.

