

LEARNING FROM MISTAKES

I could continue writing about evangelism from a theoretical and abstract perspective, but I realize that is only one way of learning. We can also learn from examples and even from mistakes. In this section, I want to share an evangelistic experience I had. Two years ago, I shared the gospel with a good friend of mine. There are some things that I did well, and some things I did poorly. Since I have had two years to reflect on this experience, I have often thought about how I could have done things better. The problem with evangelism is that we must share the gospel in real conversations, which are conducted in real time. It is hard to plan how and where a conversation will go, and sometimes we say foolish things or steer the conversation into unfruitful directions. We will be better off if we pray, lean on the Holy Spirit's guidance, prepare our minds, and learn to think well on our feet. Please, learn from my experience, particularly my mistakes.

MY FRIEND

I first met Mike¹ in 1995 when we were both students at Brandeis University. It was toward the end of my freshman year and his sophomore year. We were both interested in sports journalism; he wrote for the campus paper and I started working for the campus radio station. We were both covering an early spring baseball game. Over the next two years, we spent some time together as Mike occasionally worked for the radio station. I can't recall that we spent a lot of time hanging out as students at Brandeis, but after he graduated, we became good friends. I think it happened simply because I was one of the people from college who kept in touch with him. Sometimes, simply keeping in touch with someone and caring for how he or she is doing is enough to forge a lifelong friendship.

Over the years, Mike and I stayed in touch, as the paths of our lives diverged and, occasionally, converged. He moved to Connecticut, then Europe for a year. I moved to Austin, Texas for graduate school. For a time, he was particularly nomadic, moving every year or even every few months. At one point, he decided he wanted to consider living in Austin. He visited me twice before making that decision, and then later he moved into my apartment for a month, sleeping on a futon before he found his own place to live. (At that time, I had a roommate, also a Brandeis graduate, who has recently become a Christian.) A few months later, he moved again, but every year or so we would see each other. In 2006, Mike again was feeling restless, and Kathy and I allowed him to live in our house in North Carolina for two months. Mike is the kind of friend who is like a brother. If he ever needed something, I would give it to him, and I have a feeling that we will always be friends.

Despite this close friendship, it took about fifteen years before I ever tried to share the gospel with him. Why is that so? I suppose because my faith was small, my convictions

¹ I have changed my friend's real name to Mike, in the event that my friend finds this material.

regarding evangelism were weak, and my love for God was lukewarm at best. I was also aware that Mike knew me at a time when I made a number of mistakes in my life, before I was truly committed to following Christ. However, in 2010, the last time I saw Mike, I decided I would take the opportunity to share my faith with him.

On this occasion, Mike, who now lives in Virginia, was in the area. He had just been in Vancouver for the Winter Olympics and he came down to Everett to spend a few days in our house. Since I was taking classes at the Pacific Northwest Campus of Golden Gate Baptist Theological Seminary on Mondays, I thought we could drive down to Portland together. (I thought it would be more interesting for him to spend a day in Portland rather than alone in our house.) After driving to Portland, I dropped him off in the city, crossed the river to Vancouver for my classes, and then returned to Portland to get Mike and return home.

SETTING UP THE GOSPEL CONVERSATION

Early on a Monday morning, Mike and I got in my car and drove south on I-5. Since we had two long drives ahead of us that day—the drive down and the drive back—I wanted to use one of those legs of our journey to prepare a gospel-centered conversation. I figured it was best to share the gospel on the way back. After all, if I shared the gospel on the way down and things went poorly, we would then have a long, quiet trip back that night.

More than just wanting to avoid awkwardness, I wanted to have a conversation that led up to the gospel. Most of our conversations over the years were rather trivial: we talked about sports, television, movies, and the superficial details of our lives. Occasionally, when one of us dealt with an important life issue, like the loss of a job or a girlfriend, we talked about that. Usually, however, we didn't talk about the deep questions of life.

Sometime after we drove through Seattle, I asked Mike a big question.

“What is your goal in life? What's your purpose?”

Mike looked outside the passenger's window and said, “Oh.” I instantly worried that he knew where I was going already. I was suspecting that he was suspecting that I was about to share the gospel, and I was worried that he would shut down. But I was wrong.

“Well, I think it's important to have a family. I think leaving a legacy is important.” We talked for a while about family. I was surprised to learn that he thought it was important to be part of a lineage, to recognize ancestors on one side, and to produce descendants on the other. I was surprised because Mike was, and still is, single though he is a year older than I am. He has the same girlfriend now that he had then, but they have no plans to marry or have children. However, Mike told me that he and his girlfriend had several conversations about children and couldn't agree on the issue. I was surprised to learn that Mike wanted children but his girlfriend did not.

I was also surprised that my friend wanted to be part of something that changed the world. At least that is what he said. This was his second purpose of life, to be part of a cause. “I got into journalism because I saw it as a public service,” Mike told me. However, he wasn't covering wars or exposing corruption. Instead, he had been involved in sports journalism, often

behind the scenes, working for the websites of *USA Today* and Major League Baseball. He was (and is) currently “underemployed,” writing the occasional freelance article on local sports. Despite his personal lack of involvement in a world-changing endeavor, he told me that it was important for him to be part of something that was larger than himself.

Mike’s answers surprised me, though they shouldn’t have. I had known him for fifteen years, so I should have known these things about him. His answers surprised me because they seemed so far from his actual life. It looked as though his perception of the purpose of life was very far away from how he was actually living his life.

During this conversation, I asked some questions, but for the most part, I listened. At one point, when discussing his current girlfriend, he mentioned an ex-girlfriend, one who claimed to be a Christian. From what I knew of her, she was a Christian in name only. However, she told my friend that her religion was important to her and after dating him for a year, she broke up with him. I wonder if she used her “faith” as an excuse to break up with my friend, who is Jewish and, as I learned later, puts no faith in any religion. I took this opportunity to point out that many people—politicians, athletes, and people we know personally—claim to be Christians and are not. I’m not sure I told him that the Bible warns of this, though if I didn’t, I should have. At any rate, that was as close as the conversation came to the gospel.

I also remembered that we talked briefly about death. I asked him what he thought of dying. He said something like, “That’s a thought I try to push aside.” What he meant was that he tried not to think about death. That is what most people do, because death is disturbing, particularly for someone who has no hope.

What I did well

As I reflect on this conversation with Mike, I think I did a good job in asking some questions that could open up the doors for serious conversations, including ones about the gospel. I am also glad that we had the chance to have a long car ride, which affords the opportunity to speak at length, with limited distractions. I think one of the harder elements of evangelism is having the time and the setting to talk at length.

What I didn’t do well

I shouldn’t have waited fifteen years to have this kind of discussion with my friend. I should have known these things earlier. However, as I wrote above, our friendship often focused on less important things. Much of the time we spent together revolved around watching or playing sports, watching movies, or doing other things for fun. There is nothing wrong with that, of course, but I should have taken the time to have deeper conversations with him earlier on in our friendship.

I also should have spent more time in prayer. I can’t remember how much I prayed before we got in the car, or even as we were driving.

I also could have responded to his answers to my questions in ways that would have pushed the conversation a bit further. For example, when he told me that he wanted to be part of a cause, something that served the world, I should have asked him, “Why?” I later found out he was an atheist and if I had known that clearly at the time, I would have challenged him to give

me a basis for wanting to help others. After all, if there is no God, why contribute to society? Without God, there would be no absolute moral basis for wanting to be part of a family or a cause, since God is the source of morality. An atheist with a consistent worldview would also believe that there is no purpose to life other than surviving. Desiring to be part of a biological chain of human beings would fit into that worldview, but wanting to make an impact on the world would not.

What I could have done

I could have directed the conversation in a way that would have led toward the gospel. Here is what I could have done.

Brian: Mike, you've told me what you believe the purpose of life is, to be part of a family and to be part of a cause. Is that right?

Mike: Yes.

Brian: Well, are you doing those things?

Mike: Not really.

Brian: If you truly believed that those things were the purpose of life, wouldn't you be doing them?

Mike: I'm not sure.

Brian: Well, I think if you were convinced that those things were the purpose of life, you would. Can I tell you what I think the purpose of life is?

Mike: Sure.

Brian: I think the purpose of life is to glorify God. We do this through a relationship with Jesus. And since I want to glorify God, I want to tell you about Jesus. You see, I'm trying to be consistent with what I believe the purpose of life is.

General principles

One, it is important to plan to have longer, deeper conversations than we normally do. Finding the right environment for these conversations is very important. We may need to make an appointment to have a gospel conversation with a friend.

Two, it is also important to get away from distractions. There are simply too many distractions today, from television to the Internet, to have meaningful conversations. If you are planning to talk to someone about God, I suggest getting away from any screens (television, computers, smart phones, etc.) Having a long car ride worked for me—I had a captive audience. Having coffee at a coffee shop or a meal at a restaurant is good, but there can be distractions in public places. Having someone over for dinner and conversation is a better option. Going for a walk or a hike also eliminates some distractions and has the added advantage of calling on another witness to God: creation.

Three, it is important to think about how you are going to start a deep conversation that will lead to your sharing the gospel with your friend. Prepare some questions in advance.

Four, be sure to pray before sharing the gospel. You can offer up a short, simple, heartfelt prayer to God, asking him to open the door for the gospel and to give you wisdom and the right words to say.

THE GOSPEL CONVERSATION

After our trip from Everett to Portland, I dropped Mike off in the city and went to class. During one of my classes, I felt an increasing burden to share the gospel with my friend. In our Old Testament class, we were talking about death. This led to a discussion of the urgency of our mission. I was even more motivated to tell Mike about Jesus.

After class, I drove back to Portland and met Mike in a bookstore. We hung out a bit, and then had dinner in a nearby restaurant. By the time we left Portland to drive back to Everett, it was about 8 p.m. I was tired and it would have been easy to avoid sharing the gospel. In fact, it would have been more convenient to be quiet. I could justify my failure to share the gospel in one of several ways, thus relieving myself of the burden. I wouldn't have to get nervous as I worried how my friend would react, and I could avoid a potentially difficult conversation. After driving for about thirty minutes, I decided to begin.

“Mike, I've known you for many years, and I've never talked to you about my faith. Would you mind if I told you about what I believe?”

At that point, Mike must have been groaning inside. I am sure he didn't really want to hear what Christianity was all about. But he reluctantly allowed me to deliver this message.

From that point, I stumbled through a gospel presentation that I hadn't prepared. It would have been better if I gave him a concise gospel summary, but I hadn't memorized one. So I began with creation, and probably told him something about how Christians have different ideas regarding how creation came about, but that all Christians agree that God created everything. I talked about Adam and Eve, their sin, and their exile from the Garden of Eden. I talked about Israel and how God gave them a system of animal sacrifices. I eventually got to Jesus and the meaning of his death and resurrection. I felt like I was rambling for a long time, and it didn't go smoothly. It probably wasn't an attractive presentation of the Christian faith.

What I did well

I took a chance and shared the gospel. I unashamedly told biblical truths.

What I didn't do well

I wasn't prepared. I didn't have a concise and attractive way of sharing the core message of the gospel. I also had no idea what my friend believed. I knew he was Jewish by birth, though not by faith. I suppose I assumed he was agnostic or apatheistic. In other words, I didn't think he was an atheist per se, but I figured he was probably just apathetic towards God (hence “apatheistic.”) As you will see, my lack of understanding about my friend's beliefs hampered my efforts to get him to consider Jesus.

What I could have done

I should have started the conversation about God in a different way. I should have started by asking what Mike thought about God or Christianity, and why he thought that way. Here's how the conversation could have started.

Brian: Mike, you know I'm a Christian, right? What do you think about that?

Mike: What do you mean?

Brian: Well, what do you think about Christianity? What do you think about Jesus?

If I had started the conversation that way, it would have saved me time, but it also would have let me know how to approach the topic of God. My friend let me know what he thought of Christianity nonetheless, and I was not prepared to deal with his answer.

General principles

Before sharing the gospel, know your audience. Know what he/she/they believe. Also, be prepared to share the gospel in a concise, attractive way. There is nothing wrong with being prepared. It is not unspiritual to memorize a gospel outline. When we prepare, we should ask for God's help and rely on him, but that doesn't give us an excuse to be lazy. I firmly believe that the Holy Spirit works through our efforts. Sometimes he even works in spite of our poor and misguided efforts!

APOLOGETICS

As I wrote in the previous section, Randy Newman believes that evangelists need to be equipped to declare the gospel, defend the gospel, and dialogue the gospel.² I'm not sure that I was equipped to do any of these. I had already given a poor presentation of the gospel. I had only read one book on apologetics. And I wasn't ready for having a dialogue, a real conversation with questions and answers. I firmly believe that being equipped is the best way to evangelize. God can use the unequipped, and our training doesn't guarantee results, but there is no excuse for not being prepared.

Morality

After I shared my rambling version of the gospel with Mike, there was an awkward silence? *What was he thinking? Would he believe what I told him?*

"Well, what do think about that?" I asked.

"I think religion is for people who aren't smart enough to come up with their own moral code," Mike replied.

I still don't even know what that means. But think about all that my friend assumed. He was assuming that morality is not objective and authoritative. Rather, in his view, people create their own morality. He assumed that intelligent people could come with their own reasonable

² Randy Newman, *Questioning Evangelism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2004), 14-15.

moral code. He also assumed that people believe in a religion because they need a moral code. Finally, he assumed that religious people are unintelligent and needed to be told what to believe. You don't need me to tell you how faulty those presuppositions are. But at the time, I didn't know how to handle such faulty logic.

This is how I responded: in pride. Instead of asking, "Mike, you don't think that I'm not intelligent, do you?" I stated something about how I got better grades at Brandeis than my friend did, that I always scored well on standardized tests, that I was working on my third graduate degree, and that I was confident that I we were to stop and take an IQ test right then and there, I would easily outscore him.

What I did well

Nothing.

What I didn't do well

Everything, I suppose. I reacted out of pride. I wasn't patient or compassionate. Obviously, that was not going to be effective. Instead of defending the gospel, I was defending myself. And instead of getting my friend to think, my response was designed to embarrass and belittle my friend.

What I could have done

Here's how the conversation could have gone.

Brian: Mike, are you saying that I'm not intelligent?

Mike: No, I didn't mean that.

Brian: Well, what did you mean?

Mike: I just think that intelligent people can come up with their own morality?

Brian: Do you think morality is created by people?

Mike: Yes.

Brian: Why do you think that?

Mike: Well, I don't know, but it seems obvious.

Brian: Well, it doesn't seem obvious to me. In fact, I think the idea of creating your own morality is immoral.

Mike: What are you talking about?

Brian: If each person creates his or her own morality, that person can call evil good and good evil. I think that's immoral. And what happens when two people can't agree on morality? Who is right and who is wrong?

Mike: I think most people can agree on morality.

Brian: But they don't always. So how do you know what is right and what is wrong? What basis do you have to call anything moral or immoral?

If I had begun that part of the conversation that way, it could have led to a discussion of the basis for morality. Christianity says that God is the basis for morality. People who don't believe in God and absolute, objective morality can never confidently say that anyone is right or wrong.

Alternately, I could have told my friend that his statement—"I think religion is for people who aren't smart enough to come up with their own moral code"—is a moral statement, and therefore he made it up, and since it is made up, it is not absolutely true.

General principles

When debating with people, it can be helpful to do something called *reductio ad absurdum*. That is a Latin term from the world of philosophy. According to one definition, "In its most general construal, *reductio ad absurdum*—*reductio* for short—is a process of refutation on grounds that absurd and patently untenable consequences would ensue from accepting the item at issue."³ In other words, if I had assumed my friend's statement was true, that all morality is created by human beings, then I could point out that his statement is moral—because it has moral repercussions. Then I could point out that his moral statement was self-created, and therefore could not be true.

I also could have taken apart another aspect of his statement. I could have showed him that his statement was based not on evidence but on a faith assumption. Therefore, because his statement, which could not be proven, was a religious one, he needed some type of religion in order to have a moral code, and both the religion and the moral code were of his own creation.

To put it more simply: my friend's statement was inherently unstable and untrue. There was no evidence that supported it. He was simply making an assertion. He was begging the question. (In philosophy, making an unsupported assertion is called "begging the question.")

If our friends are not open to hearing about Jesus, we may have to show them, in love, their faulty logic and thinking. It is best to do this by asking questions that direct them to see their lack of logic. My friend might have thought I was foolish to believe in Jesus, but I could have pointed out that his assumptions were more foolish. I also could have showed him that his statements rested on faith: he believed that which was not self-evident and which no one could prove. Christianity has far more evidence than my friend's statement could ever have.

I should stress once again the importance of asking questions. Questions can help people think through statements that they themselves have never questioned. Questions can open up dialogue, whereas forcefully made statements can close down an argument. Jesus, as we will soon see, asked many questions, and we should, too.

The truth of Christianity and the Bible

After Mike told me that he believed that morality was created, we talked about Christianity and the Bible. He believed that men fabricated the Bible, which in his view is a

³ Nicholas Rescher, "Reductio ad Absurdum," *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <http://www.iep.utm.edu/reductio/> (accessed February 12, 2012).

fairy tale designed either to comfort the self or control others. (I can't remember which one he said, though I have heard both arguments.) I tried to tell him that the Bible was very complex, written over hundreds of years, and that it was very consistent in its message. I said something like, "No one could have made this up. No one *would* have made this up, because there are things in there that are potentially embarrassing, like the weakness of the disciples." He countered with the idea that those crafty men who created the Bible could have included those embarrassing details, in order to lend an air of truth to their creation.

What I did well

I insisted that the Bible was true and I gave my friend some sense of its beauty and richness.

What I didn't do well

I didn't have any great arguments lined up. I should have questioned why Mike thought the Bible was made up. What evidence did he have? Where did he hear such things? Did he actually ever read the Bible?

What I could have done

I could have defended the Bible's authenticity by presenting the evidence that comes to us from thousands of manuscripts of the Greek New Testament. I could have told him about what James White calls "multifocality," the idea that the New Testament was written by many authors at many times in many places and to many places.⁴ (In other words, no one central organization or authority produced the Bible, unlike Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon.) I personally find some of these evidences for the Bible to be very satisfying, but Mike wouldn't buy any of these arguments. Here's how I could have talked to him.

Mike: The Bible is made up. It's just a fairy tale that some people created to make them feel good.

Brian: So you've read the Bible?

Mike: No.

Brian: Then how do you know it's made up?

Mike: Well, I've heard that it was. And it has to be.

Brian: Why? What evidence is there that it was made up?

Mike: Well, I'm sure there is some.

Brian: But you don't know what it is?

Mike: I don't know off the top of my head.

Brian: I think deciding whether the Bible is true or not is a pretty big decision. No one comes to this subject without some bias. It's not like discussing some

⁴ James R. White, *The King James Only Controversy*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2009), 307.

other distant historical fact, or whether Babe Ruth was a better hitter than Barry Bonds. If the Bible is true, it changes our life. We had better be pretty sure that it's not true if we are going to make that claim. Have you ever thought about that?

Mike: Not really.

Brian: Do you want the Bible to be true?

Mike: No.

Brian: So you want the Bible *not* to be true.

Mike: Yes, I guess so.

Brian: Well, I want the Bible to be true. But the fact that you don't and I do doesn't mean much. The only thing that matters is whether it *is* true. I have some compelling reasons why it is true. But you don't have any evidence that it's not true. It seems that my decision is better informed than yours.

Mike: Well, I've never thought about it in that way.

Brian: Would you like to read the Bible? I think reading it is the best way to see whether it seems true or not. If you want, I can give you one.

That is but one way this conversation could have gone. That conversation would have been far more productive than the one we had. It was clear that my friend had never read the Bible, and he never did any serious research into the question of whether it was true or not. He must have heard some atheistic arguments at some time, and he was simply repeating them to me. Most people have never thought through these issues however, and their objections are smokescreens. Some people don't want Christianity to be true, because they don't want a God to whom they are accountable. So any argument against Christianity, no matter how simple or logically fallacious, becomes attractive to them. If we can ask them questions that get them to think deeply about these issues, we may help these people be more open to hearing about the gospel.

I could have directed that conversation in yet a different way:

Mike: The Bible is made up. It's just a fairy tale that some people created to make them feel good.

Brian: What evidence do you have?

Mike: For what?

Brian: Do you have evidence that someone made up the Bible?

Mike: No.

Brian: Then how do I know your statement isn't a fairy tale that you made up to make yourself feel good?

Of course, that direction would be more aggressive. Since Mike is a long-time friend, I could have gotten away with being so aggressive. In some cases, such an aggressive defense of Christianity can be useful, when people are attacking our faith and have no desire to learn about it. There are times when defending the faith in an earnest way, supported by a great deal of evidence, is appropriate, and there are times when it is not. We must assess each situation differently. If people are hostile to Christianity, we may need to be silent and move on, or we may need to expose their folly. This is the difference between Proverbs 26:4 and 26:5.

General principles

Most people who attack the Bible have never read it. If they have read it, they have probably not tried to understand it on its own terms. If they insist that the Bible is untrue, we should ask for evidence. If the Bible were created the way that the Book of Mormon or the Qur'an was created, there would be cause for doubt. But this is simply not the way the Bible came into existence. We will spend more time on the issue of the Bible later.

Creation

At some point in our conversation, we talked about creation. This is a complicated and divisive issue. If we can show that God created the world, or at least offer evidence to suggest that someone or something outside the universe is responsible for creation, we can make a solid argument for God. If, on the other hand, people can offer evidence to the contrary, then we could doubt our faith. It is clear that a lot is at stake with regard to this issue.

Atheists assume that the universe is a creator-less entity. They also assume that human beings are the product of evolution or natural selection. For them, natural selection (or Nature, or the Universe) becomes a God-substitute, an impersonal, undemanding, unknowable deity. Yet most evolution-minded atheists have never thought through the scientific and philosophical arguments. They have simply accepted the dogmatic stance that comes from atheistic scientists who have begged the question, asserting their theory without proper evidence.

My friend Mike assumed evolution was true, but it was clear he hadn't the foggiest clue regarding evolutionary theory. I believe I brought up the question of creation. To be honest, I can't remember just how the subject emerged. It might have gone something like this:

"Let's go back to the issue of the Bible. If God created the world, don't you think he would want to communicate to us somehow? Don't you think he would want to make himself known?"

"I don't think there's a God who created the world."

"Then what happened?"

"There were molecules . . . and the sun!"

That is what he said: "There were molecules . . . and the sun!" This is a ridiculous answer, which is why I remember it so clearly. At that point, I could have directed the conversation in this way.

Brian: Do you believe in evolution?

Mike: Yes.

Brian: Can you explain evolution?

Mike: Explain it?

Brian: Yes, tell me how we get from the Big Bang to human beings.

At this point, his lack of knowledge would be revealed. He would have nowhere to go. I could then respond:

Brian: Claiming that there is no God and that we are the products of evolution is a pretty big deal. There's a lot at stake. If you're wrong and I'm right, then that means eternity in hell for you. So you should consider the evidence. Have you ever done a lot of research on evolution?

Mike: No.

Brian: Have you done any serious research on intelligent design?

Mike: No, but it's not really science.

Brian: How do you know, if you've never done the research?

Mike: Well, I've heard it's not real science.

Brian: What if I told you that many scientists with PhDs see holes in evolutionary theory? Did you know that many scientists, mathematicians, and philosophers believe that intelligent design is a credible alternative to evolution?

Mike: Well, I guess I'd have to look into that.

Of course, that's not the conversation we actually had. Instead, we talked about the probability of a universe evolving from nothing into something. Mike told me that just because something is improbably doesn't make it impossible. He said, "If you put enough monkeys in a room with typewriters, one of them will type a Shakespeare play." Again, he must have heard this argument somewhere.

I didn't have this information at hand at the time, but the improbability of such a proposition is, well, hard to wrap your brain around. Robert Marks discusses how improbable it is to have someone (monkey or human) randomly write the King James Bible, which consists of 3,556,480 letters, not including spaces (which would have to be factored in, since at any moment the monkey at the typewriter could type any of the twenty-six letters or space, let alone punctuation marks, numbers, or special characters). The chances of randomly writing the KJB are $26^{3,556,480}$ or $3.8 \times 10^{5,032,232}$. "This is a number so large it defies description."⁵

To allow us to think about probabilities in a more relatable way, Marks suggests we consider the odds of randomly creating this phrase: IN THE BEGINNING GOD CREATED. The odds of randomly generating this phrase are 27^{28} or 1.20×10^{40} . That seems a lot smaller,

⁵ Robert J. Marks II, "Evolutionary Computation," in *Evidence for God*, ed. William A. Dembski and Michael R. Licona (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2010), 93.

doesn't it? "The chance of a monkey typing 28 letters and typing *these specific words* is the same as choosing a single atom from over one trillion tons of iron."⁶

Of course, even if I knew these numbers, I doubt that Mike would be persuaded. Rather, I should have asked him a simple question: "Who created the monkeys?" To have a proper analogy between our hypothetical monkeys typing Shakespeare and the origin of the universe, there would have to be some analogy between the monkeys who created, however blindly, and someone or ones (or something or things) that created the universe. Of course, if we're talking about God, we know that he is not created and he did not create the universe randomly or blindly. He created the universe with purpose, which is why our lives have meaning.

AN EMOTIONAL APPEAL

After debating some of these issues regarding Christianity, I finally said to Mike, "Look, I wouldn't be telling you these things if I didn't believe Christianity was true. If you had a fatal disease and I knew of the cure, wouldn't you want me to tell you?" Mike asked, "What do you mean?" Here, I dropped a theological bomb: "You're a dead man."

I had Ephesians 2:1-2 in mind: "And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked." We are all born spiritually dead. We only become spiritually alive if we believe in Jesus. Perhaps I was being hyperbolic, over the top. Perhaps I just wanted to shock my friend into thinking about the consequences of rejecting Christ. I can't say for sure, but I know he will never forget that comment.

I tried to explain that to Mike that I needed Jesus as much as he did. I explained that all of us are sinners. I told him that the more I know Jesus and his holiness, the more I am aware of my sin and inner corruption. This shocked Mike, as it tends to shock everyone else. When I tell people that Christianity is not a religion, a manmade system of self-justification, they are always surprised. I generally say something like, "All other religions say, 'Do this and you will reach heaven/nirvana/paradise.' Christianity says, 'You can't be good enough to reach heaven. That is why God had to come down and become a man.'" I still think this is a good way to talk about why Christianity is radically different from other faiths.

This conversation, however, went no further. We were at an impasse. We agreed to move on to another topic, though the tension of our conversation lingered on.

ASSESSMENT

Obviously, there were many things that I did wrong: I wasn't prepared, I didn't have a plan, and I didn't know how to ask the right questions that would lead to a real dialogue. I had the best of intentions and because I care for my friend, I want to see him believe in Jesus. However, good intentions are not enough. There is a reason why people say the road to hell is paved with them.

⁶ Ibid., 94 (italics in original).

I can second-guess my efforts. Perhaps I should have prayed more. I certainly should have been more prepared. I should have known what Mike believed about God before I tried to tell him the gospel. All these things are true. But at the end of the day, even if I had done all these things, I still may not have been successful. I was satisfied that I made a good effort to tell my friend about Jesus. I should have done this much earlier in our relationship.

Part of my problem is that I wasn't patient. I thought I had to have a one-sitting gospel conversation. I assumed I would only have one time to tell my friend about Jesus. If I had gone slower, trusting God that he would give me more than one opportunity to tell my friend the good news of Jesus Christ, I might have been more productive. It is very difficult to balance a sense of urgency and concern for our lost friends with patience and trust in God.

EPILOGUE

A few weeks later, Mike called me. He wanted to talk about our intense conversation. I was hoping that he had been thinking about my words and decided he wanted to hear more. Unfortunately, that was not the case. Instead, he wanted to know if we could continue to be friends. He told me that if he got married, he would want to have me as his best man, because that is the kind of friend I have been to him. But now he wasn't so sure. He was worried that I would always be judging him or pitying him for not believing in Jesus. He was also worried that I would always proselytize him whenever we talked. I assured him that I didn't think less of him for not being a Christian, even though I wanted him to be one. I told him I wouldn't always thump him with a Bible or give him a fire-and-brimstone sermon when we talked.

Even with this understanding, our relationship has certainly been changed, and not for the better. In the last two years, I have talked to my friend infrequently. He left our house about two days after this conversation and since he lives in Virginia, I haven't seen him since. However, we did talk for about an hour just over a week ago. It was the first time we had talked since the previous July, a span of about six or seven months. During this last conversation, I didn't mention my faith, though I talked about church because it's an important part of my life. I have hope that at an appropriate time, perhaps when I see him in person again, I can refer back to the conversation and try to correct what I did wrong. All I have to do is ask, "Do you remember that conversation we had on the car trip back from Portland?" The beauty of sharing the gospel with a friend is that our friendship can continue even if he or she rejects the gospel. Once we have opened up the subject of Jesus, we can always come back to it, if we are sensitive to our friends and the prompting of the Holy Spirit.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

How have your attempts at evangelism gone? Have you ever felt like a fool? Have you felt ill-equipped and unprepared?

Do you have lost friends that you are praying for now? If so, do you know what they believe about God and the purpose of life? Can you think of non-threatening ways of asking them about their beliefs?

Have you ever “blown it” with a friend? Can you revisit the conversation about Jesus? (Pray that God would give you another chance.)

What are you doing now to become sufficiently equipped for evangelism?

Does the Holy Spirit work through our preparation, or does becoming equipped somehow interfere with his work? If a preacher prepares for a sermon, can he still trust in the Holy Spirit’s work?

How does the role of patience enter into evangelism?

How can the right questions help us in sharing and defending the gospel?