

## Doors of Opportunity

In Colossians 4:3, Paul urges the church in Colossae to pray that God will open a door for the word so that Paul can proclaim the gospel to the lost. Not surprisingly, for as long as I've been a Christian, I've heard Christians similarly praying that God will open doors. I think it's wonderful practice to do exactly that.

However, I'm not at all sure that brethren are as comfortable with recognizing and going through doors as they are praying for them. It's one thing to be abstractly in favor of evangelism; it's quite another to look at a friend or a neighbor and say, "That's someone who might well be receptive to the gospel, so I'm going to talk to them about it!" It doesn't do a lot of good, though, to constantly be crying out to God for opportunities while neglecting the ones we have. This evening, then, let's consider the subject of doors of opportunity.

### What Doors Look Like

First of all, let's ask what doors look like. How do we know when the time is ripe to bring up Jesus to somebody? In my experience, people who are likely to listen fall into one of two overlapping categories. The first is **VISITORS TO CHURCH SERVICES**. Here, consider the account of Acts 16:13-14. Why did Paul teach Lydia? Because she showed up for worship!

Even today, one of the very best indicators of spiritual interest out there is when outsiders do what spiritually interested people do—they come to church! Let me tell you, friends; it is no small thing for a visitor to come into our assemblies. Unless they have some kind of background familiarity with the church, they have absolutely no idea what's going to happen. Many of them don't know a soul in the congregation. And yet, they're willing to face a room full of strangers doing strange things because they think they might find God there. That kind of courage needs to be applauded!

What's more, it needs to be rewarded. When first I came to Jackson Heights, I was so happy to see the teams of visitor greeters standing by the front entrance to the auditorium, armed with visitor packets and smiles. I so appreciate all the members here who are involved in that work!

However, welcoming visitors needs not to be a greeter thing. It needs to be

a whole-church thing. Whenever a visitor sits near us, we need to do what we can to make them feel comfortable and welcomed. Yes, I know—some Christians are introverted and don't like to talk to strangers. However, if they've overcome their fears to assemble with us, isn't overcoming our fears to welcome them the least that we can do? Friends, let's all do what we can to make sure that every visitor to our assemblies feels appreciated!

Second, we need to be alert for **PEOPLE IN TRANSITION**. Becoming a Christian is a big life change, and people find that change easier to make when their lives are in flux already. For instance, look at the example of the Philippian jailer in Acts 16:27-31. 24 hours before the events described here, I'd imagine the jailer thought he had life pretty well figured out. However, the earthquake turns his life upside down. He feels such a sense of failure and disgrace that he thinks suicide is the only way out.

There are lots of ways that people can similarly find themselves in transition. Sometimes, it's because they haven't figured out who they are in the first place. Because of this, teenagers and young adults are commonly more receptive to the gospel than others. Younger brothers and sisters, be alert for the opportunities around you! When my sister was in college, she led several of her friends to the truth.

People who are going through big life changes are also more likely to be open. It's common for those who get married, have children, or are going through a family or medical crisis to start asking some fundamental questions about their lives. We have great answers to those questions. If we're willing to point them to God's word, we may find ourselves surprised by how receptive they are.

Sometimes, people are simply seeking. Outwardly, everything seems fine with their lives, but inwardly, they feel like something's missing. These are the kind of people who randomly show up at services one day even if they don't know a soul there. They're also the kind of people who, once they find out that we're religious, are very curious about what we believe and start asking questions. If we feel equipped to handle those questions, great. If not, saying, "Why don't you find out for yourselves?" and inviting them to services is a wonderful second option.

### **How to Walk Through Them**

OK. So we've got somebody in our lives whom we think might be interested in the gospel. How do we handle that? Above all else, we must **ACT!** Look at how Paul handles the Philippian jailer in Acts 16:32-33. It is

literally less than an hour from the time that Paul recognizes the jailer as a prospect to the time he baptizes him. By the time that the man is saved from his sins, Paul probably hasn't even finished bleeding yet!

However, I fear that a lot of Christians choose the opposite course when presented with an opportunity. They're afraid that they're going to do the wrong thing, so they do nothing. The problem is, friends, that opportunities to teach others are often fleeting. That visitor might come twice and then never again. That life crisis might pass so that our friend goes back to the same old, same old. This is why they're called doors and not doorways. Doors can shut!

We must act, then, and we must act quickly. We have to be willing to speak up and invite outside of the assembly, and inside the assembly, we have to keep special watch over our visitors. I have to tell you, friends, whenever I see a repeat visitor, it's like they're jumping up and down with a sign that reads, "Please study with me! I'm interested!" We need to get with people like that as quickly as we can.

This is an area where every Christian here can help. I don't necessarily know who all the visitors are. From the perspective of the pulpit, it's easy to lose new faces in the crowd. However, all of you know about the visitors sitting near where you are. Make sure that the elders or Shawn or I notice that they're there. That way, we can make sure that we aren't letting opportunities go to waste.

Second, if we are talking with others ourselves rather than just pointing them to others, we must learn how to **PERSUADE**. Consider Paul's statement in 2 Corinthians 5:11. As most of you have probably figured out by now, by nature, I'm an argumentative guy. I have strong opinions on a lot of things, and I'm not at all afraid of coming right back at somebody who disagrees with me.

However, that's not at all the way that we should think of talking with somebody about the truth.

Teaching the lost is not a debate where we win and they lose if we get them to agree with us. Let me tell you, friends: once we get into an argument with somebody about the gospel, we have already lost. It doesn't matter how good our arguments are. Because we're trying to win them over, they're the ones who get to keep score, and does anybody ever think that they've lost an argument?

Instead, we have to come to others not as their opponents, but as their friends. We can't be trying to prove that we're right and they're wrong. It's not about us winning and them losing; it's about everybody winning as we explore the gospel together. We're not there to beat them down until they give up. We're there to gently guide them through the truth that they must understand for themselves. They are the hero of this spiritual journey, and we aren't.

Perhaps our biggest obstacle here is the satisfaction that comes with being right. I love the feeling of logically clobbering somebody so completely that they're left without a reply. However, rarely does clobbering somebody result in good to the kingdom. Most people are not up to the challenge of finding truth in the words of somebody who has just made them look like an idiot. We need to speak boldly, yet also speak with kindness and compassion if we want to be effective.

Finally, we must **TRUST THE GOSPEL**. Look at how God describes his word in Isaiah 55:10-11. God's word will always do God's work in the hearts of men.

From this, we should draw several conclusions. First, it should teach us that we don't need to worry nearly so much about ourselves. Yes, Christians should be loving people. Yes, Christians should show others how much they care.

However, nobody was ever saved because they believed that some Christian was loving and caring. Everybody who has ever been saved was saved because they believed that Jesus Christ was the Son of God. Once again, of all the people I've studied with and baptized, I have never once felt that I personally made the difference. Either they were gonna obey the gospel regardless of how kind and clever I was, or they weren't going to, again regardless of how kind and clever I was. It is the seed, not the sower, that is important.

In fact, this is how God's word is designed. It is designed to test hearts. People who are seeking God with honest hearts will eagerly receive it. People with wicked hearts will always find a reason not to.

However, simply because the seed does the work doesn't mean that the sower can leave it sitting in the grain bin. If we want somebody to obey the truth, we have to know enough to point them to the relevant portions of the truth. How does the Bible prove that Jesus is the Son of God? What does it say about salvation? What does it say about marriage, divorce, and

remarriage? What does it say about authority and instrumental music? If we can master these simple topics, we will be able to provide book, chapter, and verse for 95 percent of the questions that are likely to come up in a study.

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