



WHEN AND WHEN NOT

“Hey, Brian, everything ok over there?” Steve called out from his neighbor’s fence. Brian looked up and continued to pull hard on the rope, trying to start his lawn mower while mumbling under his breath.

Brian had had a hard evening the night before. He received a call that his father, who lived in Florida, was in the hospital following a heart attack. Earlier that morning he called around to a few of his church friends to see if someone might give him a ride to the airport, which was a 2-hour drive one way, to catch his late-night flight. He really needed to go be with his dad. Seems like everyone had reasons why they couldn’t take him.

Now he was trying to mow his yard, but the lawn mower would not start. He was frustrated, to say the least. Soon he walked over to the fence and began explaining to Steve what was happening, right down to the dumb lawn mower not starting!

“If you needed a ride to the airport, why didn’t you just ask me?” Steve wondered. “I would be happy to take you. What time do we need to leave?”

That evening on the 2-hour drive to the airport, Brian, who was an Adventist, began thinking about what his pastor had said in recent a sermon: “Every chance we get, we should witness to people and share the truth.” So he started sharing with Steve about the Sabbath — Steve was a Baptist.

“Here we go again,” Steve said with a bit of sarcasm and a brief sideways glance as he drove. “If I ever want to know more about the Sabbath, I will ask you, ok? Meanwhile, we don’t need to go down this road again!” He took a deep breath and switched topics. “When will you be coming back? Just give me a call, and I will make sure I am at the airport to pick you up.”

On his flight some time later, Brian thought long and hard about this conversation. Who had truly been witnessing to whom? Sometimes we put the cart before the proverbial horse!

TIME AND PLACE

The heart of Christianity is based on sharing our faith with others. But knowing when and how to do that is sometimes difficult, especially in Western culture where people are becoming more secular, and hypersensitive at the same time. Now, with all the political correctness and ideological divisions, saying something to someone at the wrong time or place can end up in an unpleasant experience.

I have shared in the pages of this magazine more than once that our “witnessing” is more

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than “doing specific things” like giving a Bible study, expounding on theology, visiting a prison or hospital, or even sharing at church. Those things are good, but being a witness is much more than that — it is who we are in Christ. Sometimes not saying anything is more powerful than preaching a sermon. Our helpful, kind, and thoughtful acts will often be remembered more than a lecture.

I have seen more than one family split over “truth,” or adult children alienated because of their parents’ “witness.” Now, this is not to say that there are sometimes good reasons why family members stop associating

and follow their own convictions. We, as parents, need to become close friends and confidants, allowing these adult children to find their own way in life, yet be their encouragers and supply advice when invited to. They should know they can trust us and that we are not judgmental toward them. More than once I will start to share something with one of my kids, just to have them stop me and say, “Yes, Dad, I know.” And they do know!

I shared this in a Sabbath School class, and a lady sitting next to me broke down and started crying. She told the class how true this was and how she loathed having her elderly mother come to visit. “She still treats me like I am 13! I can never do anything right.” Raised in a conservative Christian home, this woman’s mother had her ways of how things should be done, and if something was not done that way, it was wrong — and even a sin. She had continued her condescending ways with her daughter, who was now nearly 50 years old. It was amazing to me that this daughter still came to church.

THE RIGHT TO BE LOST

The premise of religious liberty is the right of everyone to worship or not worship God according to the dictates of their own conscience. What I am going to share may be hard for some to accept, but it is important to understand and to implement the true principle of religious liberty. We, as Christians, sometimes harbor resentment and bitterness when friends or family reject our convictions. They may mock us and disassociate themselves, and it hurts. The way we feel about how they treat us then affects the way we interface with them in return.

When I was 23 years old, my father was killed in a terrible accident. My mom and dad were both Adventist

Christians. Within 6 months, my mom secretly married a guy with four kids who was only a few years older than my older brother. She left the church and basically disassociated herself from us. The few times I did see her I am sure she knew exactly how I felt about the situation. This contributed to her not “wanting” to see us. For years she disappeared, and we did not even know where she lived.

Years passed, and my mom became elderly. I reconnected with her, and she let me know where she was living — in a nearby state. One day I received a call from Adult Protective Services. My mom had had a stroke, and she was being left alone for long periods of time while her husband was off drinking and singing in bars. Long story short, I filed for legal custody, and APS helped my mom file for a divorce. While this was happening, her soon-to-be ex-husband ran off with another woman.

We ended up moving my mom to a nursing facility in the town where we live, as the court ordered that. My wife and I started spending a lot of time with her, but down inside I was still full of resentment over the fact she left the “truth,” the church, and her family.

It is easy to harbor resentment towards those who seemingly reject the truths we hold. That rejection sometimes cuts deeply to our feelings, as if accusing us that somehow we did not share what we believe in the right way, or we feel we’ve been judged as ignorant, dumb, naive, and uneducated for believing in God and the Bible. As Christians, we sometimes look at people with disgust as we see them doing what we consider sinful behaviors — crazy lifestyle choices — which we disapprove of, and we’re quite certain they should know better.

One day I was in the kitchen thinking about how my mom was taken

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with each other — there are. But I have seen rigidity, pride of opinion, food, and a number of other unnecessary things estrange relationships.

I knew one couple who ended up in divorce. The main source of contention? The wife did not want to be vegan. One day she was caught hiding a jar of mayonnaise in a cupboard, and a big fight ensued. Her husband was the Food Gestapo. Do we wonder why people get turned off at some Christians? We need to curb our religious zeal and be tolerant toward other peoples’ personal convictions and choices — especially in the home.

Some parents do not realize that when their children get to be over 20 years old, they need to step back and allow them to live their own lives

advantage of and how she had made so many bad choices after my dad died. Then the Holy Spirit impressed me, “Do you think that I give your mother the right to choose to be lost if she wants?” The thought kept coming. “Yes, of course,” I said to myself. “Then why don’t you do the same?” came the impressed response.

I stood there in shock. “Give my mom the right to be lost?” It was as if a big burden rolled off my back. I can’t save my mom — only God can do that. I just need to do as Christ would do — love people and hope that they are drawn to Him, as He is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. I realized I no longer had to judge my mom or think critical thoughts about her. I just needed to love and accept her, reflect Christ, and enjoy the last few years of her life trying to make things the best I could for her.

About a year later, my mom was sitting on the sofa at my house. Having difficulty speaking after her stroke, she stuttered a message to me. “I wasted so much time,” she said in broken sentences, “time I could have spent with you and your family.” Over the next year before she died, we talked about many spiritual things. She told me that the reason she moved away after she married this other man was because she felt judged and condemned by me. It made me think. And now, apparently, she did not feel that way anymore. We both had changed.

NOT AS IT APPEARS

Many years ago, I was out of town on business and stopped at a restaurant to grab some lunch. While I was waiting for my order a young guy walked in and sat down at a booth near me. My first thought was, “Wow! That guy looks like he fell into a fishing tackle box!” He had piercings all

over. Tattoos covered his arms, and his long hair was dreadlocked. My condescending thought was, “Look at these kids today. Good grief! Really disgusting.”

The waitress came over to him, and they talked for some time. About 15 minutes later, she came back with his food, and hers as well. I realized she had just gotten off shift, and this was her boyfriend. They were having lunch together. As she sat down, he took off his colorful knitted hat, reached across the table and took her hand, and they had prayer together for the food. Goes to show that one just never knows, and how partial our judgment sometimes can be. “For the Lord seeth not as man seeth; for man looketh on the outward appearance, but the Lord looketh on the heart” (1 Samuel 16:7).

SEEING THROUGH THE EXTERNAL

As I thought about this, I realized that as Christians we often pass judgment on people — on what they eat, how they dress, whether they have tattoos, if they smoke and drink — whatever trend might be influencing them at the time. And these people pick up on our self-righteous vibes. We need



to see people, not as they are, but as what they could be in Christ. We should be able to see through, and not get hung up on, all the external things — to realize that God has sent us to be ambassadors for Him to exemplify His love for all around us.

“And all things are of God, who hath reconciled us to Himself by Jesus Christ, and hath given to us the ministry of reconciliation; To wit, that God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them; and hath committed unto us the word of reconciliation. Now then we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech you by us: we pray you in Christ’s stead, be ye reconciled to God” (2 Corinthians 5:19-21).

We have been given the work of reconciliation, which means we are fence-menders, trying to bring people together in Christ. When this came home to me, I was able to make friends with just about anyone. I do not know how many times I have talked with and built relationships with people whose appearance or lifestyle might scare some Christians. By taking a personal interest in them, I find a story that opens my eyes about their lives and why they are where they are. More than once I have had people say, “I normally don’t talk with people about things like this, but I just feel comfortable with you.”

Part of this comes from the fact that they do not “feel” judged by me. Often it is simply a willingness to lend an ear or a helpful hand. Building trust is so important. As you go through your day, make the conscious decision to not be automatically judgmental of people. See them as a mission. Let your life reflect Christ in your attitude. Smile and know that God is with you as you set out on your mission of reconciliation.