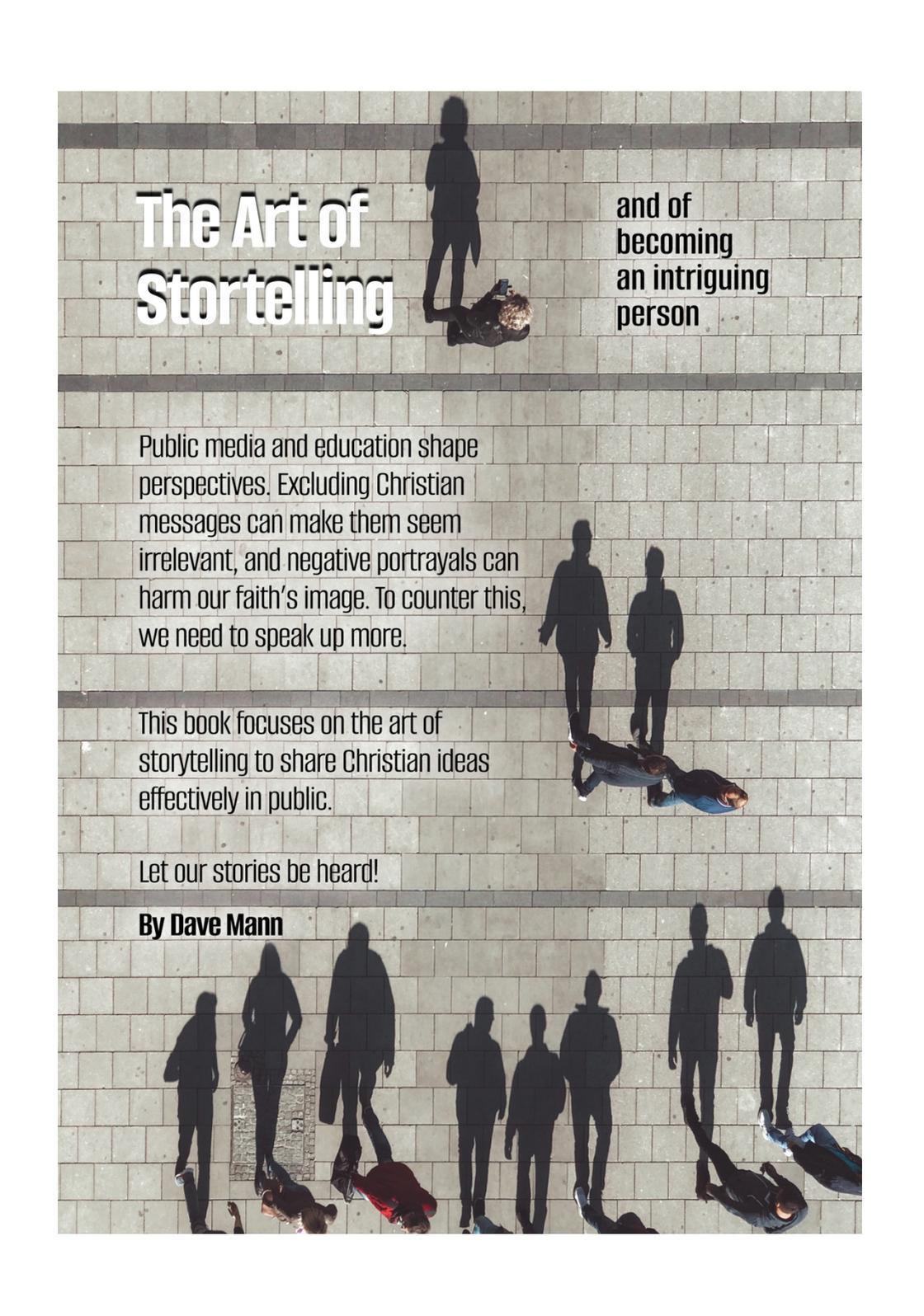


The Art of Storytelling



and of
becoming
an intriguing
person

Public media and education shape perspectives. Excluding Christian messages can make them seem irrelevant, and negative portrayals can harm our faith's image. To counter this, we need to speak up more.

This book focuses on the art of storytelling to share Christian ideas effectively in public.

Let our stories be heard!

By Dave Mann

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Public media and education shape perspectives. Excluding Christian messages can make them seem irrelevant, and negative portrayals can harm our faith's image. To counter this, we need to speak up more. This book focuses on the art of storytelling to share Christian ideas effectively in public. Let our stories be heard!

Introduction

This series is about a specific topic: The communication of Christian messages within semi-hostile or disinterested Western environments – like here in our own homeland of New Zealand. These brief chapters are purposed to give perspectives that might help Christian believers see how they could engage with their story more often – on secular platforms – and even be loved for doing so!

This is concurrently a support resource for our ‘Why Christians believe Christianity to be true’ video and booklet series, which can be found for free online at <https://WhyChristiansBelieve.nz>.

For several decades now, there has been a general neglect in many church circles of talk and teaching about reasons for faith. I suggest we might be paying a heavy price for that neglect. However, if we were to value and restore talk about the ‘reason for faith’ in our churches, that effort would quickly beg another question: How do we use that knowledge? How do we ‘translate’ what we’ve learned into our everyday conversations in our schools and workplaces?

I believe there is a revelation here to catch. This has certainly been the case for me. Pushing against the ‘dumbing down’ of Christian messages in public places has been something of a preoccupation in my life as a Christian communicator. Like a long walk taken one step at a time, I’ve more recently realised the distance I’ve come. There are things I do now that I didn’t do 20 and 30 years ago when in the same general area of work. This book is about putting some articulation to what I’ve learned about storytelling - with ‘secularised’ public spaces in mind.

There is a perspective and a skillset for everyday witness here that can be learned!

#1. If beliefs lead to behaviour

An understanding that ‘beliefs lead to behaviour’ is foundational to an understanding of why ‘reasons for faith’ conversations are important in our churches. It also reveals why this topic might be something we’ve neglected to our own detriment.

- An unanswered question can become a doubt
- A doubt can take root as a new belief
- Those new beliefs then undermine our true-beliefs, with two key effects.
- The strength of (a) our faith and also (b) our witness will naturally then be decreased!

It is therefore likely that we are losing people in all age groups due to unanswered questions.

Many in our churches may never have heard a holistic (‘start to end’) articulation of why we believe this faith to be true. They will instead have heard bits and pieces. They can’t therefore bring knowledge about reasons for faith to their conversations. For many, they will therefore choose to stay silent. As one example, two-thirds of the young adults in our churches leave in the 18 to 22 year old age bracket. It’s hard to defend what you don’t know. There’s also little point sticking with something you no longer truly believe. The point is, we are likely paying a price as churches for the low value we have placed upon knowledge that affirms the intellectual credibility and truth of our faith.

In our Pentecostal circles the ‘experiential’ dynamic is given a level of diligence – and this has great value. God’s Spirit can work in our lives! However, given we live in a highly religiously sceptical society, I suggest this is only half a picture. (For context, one recent international study on ‘Faith and Religion’ placed New Zealand as the third most secular nation in the world. First and second places went to Spain and France, with fourth and fifth going to the UK and the United Arab Emirates (then Egypt, Australia, Argentina, Canada, Hong Kong, then Mexico). Amazing experiences of God’s love and power are not enough - alone. Many of the young

adults who leave our churches have had amazing and profound experiences of God's love and grace. Consider then that Hindus have religious experiences too. How is one experience different to the other? Consider also the strength of the voices of scepticism in our society – as echoed through public TV, web media, at schools, universities and work places. The voices of faith from our churches and related groups are quiet by comparison.

It's not difficult to understand why many lose interest and conviction regarding our faith!

Why then have we not valued a knowledge of the reasons for believing this faith more – and especially when such a broad body of research, information and evidence exists? The Apostle Paul said, *"I have become all things to all people that by all possible means I might save some"* (1 Corinthians 9:22). Our love for those who do not know Christ alone could convince us this knowledge is actually very important! The Apostle Paul valued sound reason – as also did Peter. Consider how in his recorded gospel preaching in Acts 2 and 3 he spends most of his time in both cases pointing toward evidences for his message that were relevant to his audiences.

- This knowledge directly connects to the strength of our people's faith.
- This knowledge directly connects to the confidence of our people's witness.

I believe we have paid a price for our neglect. This is a hard word.

Were we to agree that a knowledge of reasons for believing our faith is something to be valued more, that would raise a second question. How could our members be helped to communicate that knowledge in secular environments? This specific question is the topic of this short book.

At the base of this there is a small 'change of approach' needed. As an overview, the 'old mode' is maybe best typified by words like 'argumentation' and 'telling'. It was about knowledge and facts. We engaged rationally to discuss what might be

true. This approach isn't working so well today. The reason is that many have rejected the fundamental idea of truth in their thinking. *'You have your truth and I have mine!'* The challenge is therefore in working out how we might intrigue these people to engage in conversations that they have otherwise seemed disinterested in! Many in our churches have not worked out how to do this – which is why their witness in secular places has fallen silent.

If we could change this, it would make a difference. The things people hear affect the way they think! Put differently, public voices shape public perspectives! We live in a highly secularised society. Positive reference to the Christian faith are rare in the public square – while negative references are common. Very few voices affirm the probable reality of a God and spiritual reality– while many suggest spiritual ideas should be kept personal and private. *'Science explains reality – not religion. The various religions are not actually true, but we accept that they must be tolerated and respected in the sense that they can hold a personal or cultural value to an individual.'*

The thing called 'truth' is therefore now being significantly defined in our society by what people hear. Repeat something enough and people will believe it! This is why we must speak again. Our silence gives permission to a negative trend. If the public are led to believe that our faith brings more harm than good, their hearts will be hardened toward us and the hope-filled messages we bring. Speaking can change this!

So, how could we now engage more intentionally and winsomely within our more 'hostile' societal, school and work environments? How could we provoke thoughts or stir interest – to diminish religious scepticism, while addressing untruths that are being built into cultural perspectives? Let's start.

#2. A difference between what we say and how

There is a big difference between knowing WHAT we want to say and knowing HOW to say it. How we say things in public environments should be different to how we speak in our church environments. This is a skill-set that many are not strong in, and for which role-models are sometimes difficult to find.

We therefore look to Jesus for a framework – but then to current wisdom and experience for an application in our times.

Jesus communicated many things through stories and questions. He was also a master at brevity in communication – which this chapter will also demonstrate.

Stories are memorable. Memorable things are also repeatable. Stories can additionally carry meaning. However, like Jesus did, stories can also be wisely used to conceal a matter if an audience is hostile. Sometimes, when in a highly ‘secularised’ environment, directly answering a question is foolish because there is prejudice. For example, consider when Jesus was asked, *‘Jesus, should we pay taxes to Caesar?’* Or how about, *‘Jesus, we caught this woman in adultery. The Mosaic Law says she should be stoned. What do you say?’* Wisdom was needed – and sometimes that also included silence!

It is sometimes wise to conceal a matter! However, in balance to that, true love must surely compel us to speak, to testify to what we have seen and known! God is real! There is a greater meaning and purpose to our lives! There is an enduring hope that can be found – despite the pain of this life! The question is, how do we bring these ideas into our conversations when we are in potentially hostile or disinterested environments?

This is a thought that has plagued me my whole life. Most of my work life has been spent representing a united body of Christ in public spaces. How could we get the ‘God conversation’ back on the table for discussion?

It's clearly not about being blunt in the sense of just telling people what we think. Our goal isn't to win arguments as much as it is to win people – and we know it is possible to win arguments – while losing people!

I suggest the answer to this question is significantly about our manner. As 1 Peter 3:15-16 puts it – to paraphrase - always be ready to explain the reasons for the hope you have – but do this gently and respectfully, and authentically too!

The question is, how could we 'translate' points we might like to make into stories and questions suiting our conversations? So the point isn't missed, this is exactly what Jesus was doing when he told his various parables and stories (and we'll look briefly at how the Apostles Peter and Paul connected with different audiences in the next chapter).

The adaption here for us is in considering what stories might connect in our cultural environment. We cannot do exactly what Jesus did, because our culture environment is not the same as his. His audiences were Jews, who were spiritually open and engaged. Our audience is of largely sceptical Westerners, who have been trained to be spiritually disconnected and vague. So, what kinds of stories could we tell?!

We often limit our stories to the gospel story, and maybe our own primary story about how we came to faith. We believe these are the two stories we're supposed to tell. The suggestion of this book is that these are only two of many hundreds of possible stories we could tell, all of which could point people, one small step at a time, toward their Creator.

Introducing six types of stories for our conversations

1. Stories from our own life experience
2. Stories from other people's life experience
3. Stories from the natural world (reason, logic, science)
4. Stories from our bicultural history
5. Stories from our values history
6. Stories from the Bible.

I suggest the above is ‘gold’ for our Christian witness in semi-hostile environments. Through stories fitting these categories, Christian thoughts and ideas can be introduced into conversations – giving people reasons to consider this faith – while also being done with wisdom and tact.

I have maybe 20 to 50 stories sitting within my general knowledge in each of the above categories. I’ve included references to various possible sources of stories at the end of this book. I use these stories in public talks, private conversations – and in talks to church communities. The stories are like a ‘resource bank’ that I am able to draw upon for my public communication. Through the process that is outlined in this book, I’ve worked out how I can adapt quickly within different environments to say things that are meaningful.

Were we each to pause and reflect, I’d think most would have at least 10 to 20 stories in each category. We will know more stories than we initially realise we know also. The exercise here is about identifying stories we could tell, or things we could say, that we’ve never before thought of saying!

This is also about positioning ourselves to become more intentional in the stories we do tell, and the things we do say, when in conversation in public spaces. With an awareness of what different people might connect with or be interested in, opportunities can be created. Sometimes a personal story is more powerful than a factual one. Sometimes a story from history will connect more than a personal one. The point is to recognise the variety we could draw upon – to connect!

Finally, as a habit, at the end of any short story, we are always wise to ask a question. This is because the key to great conversations is great questions! This is also – of course – what we see Jesus doing. I once summarised his approach to public communication with the following three things: Jesus asked questions, told stories and made intriguing statements.

Let’s now look briefly at the Apostles Paul – and then again at Jesus, to consider how they connected with people. We’ll then lay a foundation for the series – which

is the articulation of a possible difference in the approach we might take as contrasted to what Jesus, Peter and Paul did.

-----Exercise-----

So it is noted, an exercise is found in the last chapter of this book that focuses around how we might translate our ideas into stories and questions, for our communication. While the chapters here impart perspectives, if this book is ever looked at by a group, that exercise has immense value. In fact, to repeat it half a dozen occasions with a group could have a profound effect upon the way they engage with the world around them through story!

#3. Finding the connection point

If we look at how Paul represented the Christian faith – he always connected to something of interest to his audience first. He'd then leverage that first connection to introduce the ideas he wanted to communicate. He did this intelligently too – with different approaches in different places.

In Acts 17 Paul arrives in Athens. He'd just come from Berea where he had reasoned from the Scriptures that Jesus was the Messiah. The Bereans applied their minds to examining the Scriptures, to see if what he said was true. Now at Athens, he again went first to connect with the Jews and god-fearing Greeks first. They were the most like him, and he related to them the best. His message included evidences for placing faith in Jesus primarily - we can safely assume seeing his wider pattern of ministry - from the prophecies in the Scriptures about him. He then went to the market place – where I think we can be confident that he now didn't talk about Old Testament prophecies as his primary approach. He adapted – and engaged with a different set of stories and illustrations! It was here that a group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to debate with him. Struggling to understand his message – which included talk about Jesus and a resurrection, they brought him to a meeting of the Areopagus. Pauls' wisdom as a communicator is again highlighted. Having seen an inscription he to 'the unknown god' he engaged to talk about that 'god'. The short record of the occasion says enough to reveal that his primary message was around a God existing who is above the creation. We therefore should not worship the creation – but instead its Creator! In suggesting this great God might then also be a personal God who can be known he quoted two Greek philosophers (the Cretan philosopher Epimenides and then the Cilician Stoic philosopher Aratus) who affirmed the same idea. It was very clever thing to do! (To note it, there is no evidence he quoted the Bible with this non-church, non-Jewish audience.)

It's remarkable to consider that he might not have communicated the full and whole gospel message on that first occasion too! Having mentioned the

resurrection some were put off – while others were intrigued. His goal might therefore reasonably have been to entice or intrigue them with key parts of the story. He pointed to a Creator – and to Jesus – and said enough to generate a small group of followers who were then keen to hear more. This bore fruit.

If we consider Jesus’ paradigm for public communication again,

- Jesus engaged with the interested
- He intrigued the disinterested
- He deflected the hostile.

This is a good little ‘formula’ to remember!

One thing Jesus’ example affirms is that we don’t always have to say everything. In fact, sometimes it is appropriate to say hardly anything. It all depends on the context and the audience.

Note that Jesus told parables to the crowds which he then didn’t explain! The parables were a tool for teaching, while also a tool of intrigue – and one that sifted audiences. They made sense to those with open hearts while remaining confusing for those with dull hearts. By never explaining the parables Jesus avoided the possibility of accusation from people who were hostile toward him in those crowds, looking for words they to hang him on (literally).

When people are not interested and possibly even prejudiced against our beliefs due to things they’ve heard, our logical goal is not to ‘tell’ them something. We already know they are not interested, right? Instead our logical goal is to find a way to intrigue them – in the hope that they might become interested. This is where an approach based around stories and questions can be powerful!

Please note there is a distinction I am making here between our regular conversations, and opportunities we might try to create in highly secularised spaces. Many have written or taught on skills for general Christian outreach –

myself included. *What we are talking about here is the reinsertion of Christian messages in secularised and public spaces where many are otherwise currently not thinking to say much. My point in this series is that – no matter the context or audience, there are ways to still say something! It is possible to impart spiritual thoughts and ideas even in the most secular environment – and given how many of our public spaces are becoming highly secularised, this an important topic!*

A change in approach – for secular spaces

I suggest firstly that there is a ‘permission card’ in our culture to push back on this. In Te Ao Māori (the Māori world) the wairua (the spiritual) is intrinsic to all of life. In this way of seeing life – which is exactly the same for the Christian – the spiritual is a part of everything. So spiritual comments actually can be made in secular places in our nation! *The skill set is all within how we do this.*

Imagine a point of reason related to our faith that you’d like to communicate to someone. Or consider a question you think someone might have about our faith. Now consider a story you could tell that might answer that question or make that point. A ‘tactic’ here is to tell that story *without ever directly stating the point you are wanting to make*. This is an approach Jesus modelled - leaving his audiences to work out the point of his stories for themselves. For us though, I suggest this can then have a second layer that Jesus and Peter and Paul never needed. Their audiences were spiritually awake. Everyone worshipped a god of some kind – while that is not the case in our society. The idea here is that we tell a story that includes a faith message - that we then intentionally do NOT highlight. We instead use the story as an illustration of a different point about which both we and our audience agree.

To explain that differently, stories can be used for two purposes at a time, instead of only one. Desiring to make a point that our secular audience will agree with, we choose a story that concurrently points to something that speaks favourably about spiritual things.

The story is leveraged to make a point everyone will agree with – while sitting as clear evidence for another point, which is left unstated.

I've practiced this approach many times now. I most enjoy using stories from history, and from nature. What it uniquely achieves is a restoration of talk about spiritual ideas and thoughts in secular places, while everyone also enjoys the conversation! If a person is positioned to share small thoughts with a group on a regular basis, the inclusion of stories with gently spiritual references within them can also change the spiritual environment or dynamic of a place, to make spiritual consciousness and conversation normal instead of strange.

For example, imagine I want to communicate an agreed message that human life is truly valuable. This is maybe important because are too many young people losing hope, suffering depression, or worse still suicide. So, I tell a story about the human cell with all the information in its DNA, and the robots (called Kinesins) walking around carrying and fixing things with their two legs and two arms... noting my amazement at the intelligence needed to write the coding that enables these amazing things. I then wrap the small illustration up by saying, *“and that’s why all people are important. What each person is made up of is like a miracle. Life is precious – and amazing, and this is something we need to help those who are struggling for meaning or hope in their lives to be assured of. Their lives matter!”*

The non-Christian social worker hearing my point will applaud my message! Meanwhile, a reason to believe that there is a God has also been clearly stated within the mix. It’s an approach that isn’t difficult, that suits our times – and that can be effective in stirring interest!

What, then, if a couple of hundred thousand people from our churches were to capture this idea – to then tell a few more stories than they might previously have. It would have an effect upon the thinking and spiritual consciousness of those who hear their stories! No one else is going to tell our stories for us too!

A catalyst for a change in approach for me was the realisation that I could tell a story from NZ history that communicates a spiritual point – on a secular platform –

and people loved it! As I considered the dynamic I realised that the same could work for stories from nature - or in relation to reasons for believing our faith – and more! The key was in discovering the dynamic that made these stories acceptable to the secular mind – to then transfer it to a wide range of other stories. One story at a time, I could help people become aware again of the spiritual dynamic of the world around them – while also connecting at their point of interest, like Paul did in Athens.

To summarise the tactic again, this is about stories that include reference to matters of faith – but within which those matters of faith are not the main emphasis or point. It’s an approach to storytelling in public places that works in our culture!

Instead of saying nothing, we can say something!

#4. Identifying the opportunity

A few decades ago, when there were questions about our faith – or objections to it – we might rise to defend our faith. As noted earlier, this made sense to the ‘modern’ mind, which was a rational mind. However, from the 1970s or 1980s onwards, we’ve been dealing with the ‘post-modern’ mind. This believes everything and nothing is true – because we all have our own truth. (In the postmodern mind, there both is a God – and isn’t a God, and no actual moral code exists even though right and wrong also clearly do, and all religions are equally true – being all true and therefore also all equally false.)

Add to this an ever-increasing culture-wide scepticism that has developed toward our faith, and it’s not hard to see why Christian witness can be a challenge.

At its core, I suggest we’re now dealing with a culture-wide belief that our faith has been proven to be false. This is a key statement. This is why so few have questions about our faith. They believe it’s been proven to be untrue – so what’s the point in asking a question?! *"I mean, we know there’s probably no God; all the religions are basically the same; the Bible is a book of myths – no different from any other religious book; and if there is a miracle occasionally, all religions have them, right?"*

It’s quite pointless trying to prove the truth of something to a person who doesn’t believe truth exists! They’ll simply entrench themselves in their own ideas because, why change your view if both everything and nothing is true? We might even give a good argument – which they have the clarity of thought to see and admit – but they might then equally leave that conversation with no intent to change their views. As a generous person, they might also walk away feeling genuinely happy for you that you found your ‘truth’! Though, if your manner was ‘dogmatic’ – asserting your view with conviction as if you really did think it was actually true – they might also feel a bit uncomfortable about how intolerant and judgmental you seemed to be, because it seemed like you thought they should believe what you believe!

This is where the power of stories and questions needs discovering. Stories can say something without saying it. To put that differently, stories provide a gentle way of *still saying something*.

Consider that there are very few things said in a statement that could not equally be rephrased as a question – or retold as a simple story or illustration. Stories and illustrations can ‘seed’ ideas, stirring interest while providing a possible platform for future conversations. The application here is in our people skills and communication skills. As we master the art of a good story, we might discover there are more opportunities in secular spaces than we previously realised!

By the way, here (as revision) are the six types of stories we could bring to our conversations

1. Stories from our own lives
2. Stories from other people’s lives and experiences
3. Stories from the natural world (including reason, logic and science)
4. Stories from our bicultural history
5. Stories from our wider values history
6. Stories from the Bible.

Different types of stories will then appeal to different people – and practice makes perfect!

Places to tell stories

To help you see some possible applications of this, imagine you are part of a team in a charity or work environment or similar group in which the team sometimes gathers for a short karakia (prayer). This practice is increasingly common here in New Zealand – and a very short thought could be shared before that karakia. If you were the one to pray, you might, therefore, have a chance to share a short story (2 minutes) about something ‘spiritual’.

To understand the dynamic, the word ‘spiritual’ in a secular environment refers to
something that evokes a sense of wonder or hope.

The point of this series is that you could be intentional (a) to tell a story (b) that has a side-reference to the idea of a God or faith. Yet, because the ‘God’ factor is a side-point, not the main – your words do not offend the secularists who are present. If the DNA of this can be ‘caught’, you might just have found a way by which you can introduce and share very gentle spiritual ideas and thoughts again and again. Without question, doing so affects perspectives and open conversations!

Or for a different context, imagine you are a pastor whose church has a number of community ministries that meet needs in the community. The spiritual dynamic can easily fall silent in these. Imagine your community ministry has now become highly ‘secularised’ – with no Christian references. This is not uncommon. You could start a HABIT of visiting the team to thank them for what they do – maybe calling them together for a ‘word of encouragement’ that reminds them of the importance of their service, followed by a brief karakia (prayer). Again, that story could achieve a few purposes – one being to affirm the possible truth or value of the Christian faith. The skill is in how this is approached – for example, if most of your team members are not Christians.

To note it, because we are in a society that is wanting to show respect to people of all faiths, it is acceptable for any person to say a little about their own faith. The key is in never saying anything that insinuates that others are wrong or should believe the same thing as we do. This is to say, the above approach is entirely acceptable in our current cultural environment! Were a Hindu, Buddhist or Muslim to do the same, I expect that we would likewise have no problem with them bringing an illustration for a common point out of their own faith or cultural tradition. In addition, we might even appreciate it, because it gives us an insight into how they think, and regarding what they value.

Once modelled, this approach will likely be more caught than taught. Other Christians in your team might then pick up on your method – for example, seeing how positively stories from our bicultural history are received. They then relay the same story you told to a client of theirs when in conversation, thereby again encouraging a perspective of hope and faith.

There are therefore opportunities within cultural seasons – like Christmas and Easter – but also Mothers’ Day, Waitangi Weekend, Matariki and ANZAC. With creativity, it’s possible to tell meaningful and hope-filled stories in connection with all of these season!

There will be special events, including birthdays, weddings, funerals, community dinners, and various other celebrations – at which a story could be told to make a positive point.

There will be clubs and societies that we are involved with, whether cultural, sporting or in connection with the creative arts.

Many will then have opportunities also within their daily work – as also through church ministries that serve others and meet needs. The earlier part of this chapter gives an idea, where a short story can be used to help say something encouraging to a work team. It’s not hard to tell an interesting or fun story – while with wisdom, this can concurrently raise awareness of the spiritual world around us.

There are then our many personal conversations and interactions in which short stories can readily be used.

My suspicion is that many of these kinds of opportunities are being missed because our church members cannot see that there even is an opportunity - because the paradigm of storytelling mentioned has not been explained or only very rarely modelled.

Faith messages can be heard in secular places through storytelling.

Let’s now look at what I think is the key dynamic.

#5. The power of a ‘by the way’ story

In this chapter I am going to expand on what has already been said to give some examples, to help us see how valuable our storytelling can be as a part of our witness, which is concurrently a part of the much wider work of God’s Church.

As noted already, the approach I’ve come to for communicating Christian ideas in secular spaces is storytelling *within which the ‘Christian’ dynamic is a secondary ‘by the way’ factor in the story – not the primary*. This means I tell a story in which the primary message is about something that myself and the other person (or audience) agree on.

An example: Earlier, I illustrated with a story from reason – discussing the wonder of our DNA, noting that intelligent information needs an intelligent cause. The inference to the existence of God is clear within the illustration – but the illustration was used to make a point about how amazingly people are, not about God! As a communication skill, the distinction lies in the ‘What I learned was...’ statement or question that we put at the end of the short story or illustration. Mine was, *“All people have value – and any person who’s struggling with depression, or looking for purpose in their lives needs reminding of this!”* You’ll quickly see how a secular audience might then applaud this message.

People in our society have no troubles with Christians believing in their faith – or with Christians being Christians. What they don’t want is the ‘judgmentalism’ or ‘pressure’ they perceive when we say things that (in their eyes) ‘push’ our views. Their sensitivity especially relates to any inference in our words that anyone else should believe what we believe. The revelation is that we can, therefore, include references to God or miracles or faith within our stories as long as there isn’t a strong sense within what we’ve said that we are trying to ‘push our faith’ or ideas!

Stories from history are especially powerful in this regard. They are a great way to highlight the value of Christian faith because it has objectively brought more good to humanity by way of transforming lives, and then also the values of whole societies for good, than any other thing!

An example: To give an example from history here in New Zealand – imagine a primary point I want to make is about the importance of kindness and charity within a society. All people will agree with this point. I might choose to make this point by briefly telling the story of Rev Marsden’s kindness to Chief Ruatara, helping the sickly young chief found on a ship be restored to health. Their friendship resulted in Ruatara’s invitation to Marsden to set up a mission station here in New Zealand, which resulted in our first invited Pākehā (non-Māori) settlement. From there, the Christian message of peace went out – spread by Māori well ahead of the missionaries. A culture of violence was transformed to one of relative peace - while Māori also then imparted to one another many amazing trade and other skills, new foods and more, all of which brought an improvement to life. For a closing statement to the story, *“This demonstrates how powerful kindness is. We never know what will result from it. It’s always worth giving people time, to meet their needs, and to lend a helping hand!”*

Again, you’ll quickly see how a secular audience would applaud that message – and even more so because I valued our nation's bicultural history, which our New Zealand society is increasingly recognising as something to value.

A key: The communication 'gem' is in the concluding *“...and what I learned was...”* statement. This is where I draw a conclusion that everyone agrees with. This is what builds the bridge.

For a context on the prior example, here in New Zealand some would like to suggest Christianity was an imposition of colonisation. If this were so, as we 'decolonise', it might be appropriate to also 'de-Christianise'. The above account from our history tells a different story. In truth, the Christian message was invited by Māori – not imposed by colonisers! The missionaries were also considerably

‘anti-colonialistic’ – the very opposite of what is often suggested by sceptics. Also of note, Māori then embraced the Christian faith – but only after careful consideration spanning over a decade of observation. They then also spread the message the length of these lands themselves - it wasn't the missionaries who did most of that. The amazing result was that the ways of peace then replaced ways of war that had existed among Māori for many centuries. The significance of the story is therefore that it can change the way Christianity is viewed in our nation. It wasn't an imposition that we should now remove. It was instead genuinely invited and embraced by Māori – who then spread it – and that resulted in much good (despite the bad that followed as Māori were then disregarded and ‘colonised’)!

An example of the opportunity: I've had the privilege of being able to put this approach to communication into practice many times over the past few years, and on numerous platforms. This includes one-on-one conversations with plausibly hundreds of people due to our 'Hope Project' national media projects, as well as through speaking to groups. One of my most regular opportunities came about due to my involvement with Scouts.

For just shy of 5.5 years I was a Scouts leader at a Scouts group based in our local church. It was a logical involvement for me because we have four boys – who have all been involved. Each week there is an activity with a lesson or skill to teach, which we logically then connect to a life value. Within any small lesson or thought given, a gentle reference to God was entirely acceptable. These were, however wisely stated as a personal statement, being sensitive in noting that most children and families involved were not Christians. In our group, a truly friendly culture developed that saw many parents choosing to stay throughout the programme rather than dropping their children off and leaving. We gave relationship to the parents. We were friends! Our friendship together clearly met a social / emotional / relational need. It certainly did for me. It was really enjoyable!

Anyway – the point is, week after week I found myself with an opportunity. I often had only a few minutes to prepare. I'd note the evening's theme or prior activity,

find a story with a sentiment of hope that connected thematically. I'd then give a short 5-minute thought.

Through five years of this, I landed on a pattern for communication that I wish I could have mastered at age 20! I used to struggle with talks to schools – and particularly some Intermediate Assemblies we got to speak in. Talking about Christian things to audiences that are primarily non-Christian, with due sensitivity, is not easy!

My approach was as follows, (1) I'd find a story from one of the above 6 areas of story – thematically (broadly – not specifically)) connected to the evening's activity or theme. (2) I'd then briefly link that story to a second story – whether from the Bible or my own life experience, to draw out the value or lesson being communicated – with humour. This second story might only be two sentences long – noting an amusing experience of something similar. (3) I'd then conclude with a '*...and what I learned was...*' type of statement and (4) a question. The closing point was always carefully chosen – being sensitive to the environment. The question then opened it up for others to comment – with the full scope of everything said in the picture. The children would always have their hands up before I'd even asked the concluding question – with questions to ask, statements to make, and stories of their own to tell. It was fun and dynamic!

To put definition to some of the dynamics:

- These were 'Christian talks purposed for secular environments and audiences' – like this series is about.
- A key dynamic was that I was unapologetically 'Christian' – because I am a Christian, which everyone knew! That is authentic, and no one had a problem with that!
- What surprised me was the scope of what could be discussed – noting this was a regular opportunity. I was forced to draw upon different stories, each being connected to the day's theme in the programmes – *but then*

also intentionally to cover different messages related to life, faith and hope!

The point is, I learned that a lot can be said – and it bore specific fruit! There was hardly a parent involved while I was there with whom there weren't a number of meaningful conversations – whether about parenting, life's challenges or faith. On various topics, I'd throw out questions to the parents also – like getting one of them to tell a 'real life story' that illustrated a point made in my first (history/reason/nature) story. It was a free-flowing and respectful environment. At least two parents made their own religious decisions to value or embrace Christian ideas and beliefs in their lives. All others seemed to view the faith very positively – including openly discussing it.

An example: For an example from another context, I've had the opportunity to apply the same storytelling and conversational approach in hui (gatherings) on Marae. This has been both in conversation and through opportunities to speak. One occasion, in particular, is highly memorable for me. While the story is too long to tell here with all of its interesting details, suffice to say, after speaking with as many as 300 present I had a near-standing ovation. What was so intriguing and encouraging was that I had significantly talked about Jesus' influence in history, including upon political systems and freedoms – in both the European and New Zealand (bicultural) contexts. It was not a Christian gathering. I also hadn't expected to be speaking to this particular crowd. I was also one of a very small number of people there without Māori blood in their mix. So – being conscious of the 'elephant in the room' (why is a white fella talking to us and on our turf?), I launched into a series of 5 or 6 very short stories about my cultural ancestors as a 'white fella', showing key points that changed the course of European history – that then echoed into New Zealand in a positive way. The stories cut through the unseen 'tension' – noting again that I'm a 'white boy' who then ended up with the privileged place of having the microphone within a larger hui in which most had gathered for a purpose separate from our own. The 'formula' of a story, with a

secondary message works if the primary message is something everyone can agree upon!

This is a skill-set to capture and bring to our conversations and talks.

It is also IMPORTANT that certain stories be ‘made famous’ – because they change people's perceptions about the place and relevance of our faith to our society and lives. The story of Ruatara mentioned is like that – as also is the story of the first prayer in the first sitting of the first New Zealand Parliament. Many stories from the natural world can then point out that it's more rational to believe there is a God than not – and making all these points is genuinely important!

We must engage more in our secularised public spaces because the stories people hear affect their perspective! Those perspectives in turn define their ‘truths’. If we do not speak, we lose! It is also possible to speak with favour on all manner of platforms - religious and secular – if we can learn the art of a good story that has a faith reference as it's ‘secondary’ meaning, while a commonly agreed message as its first!

Endnote:

- A message inherent in the first prayer in the NZ Parliament – which caused the first debate – is that, while there were atheists and irreligious people in the room, we were always intended to be a nation built upon Christian values as contrasted with those naturally arising from atheism. It was never imagined Parliament would open without a Christian prayer, and in the absence of agreement as to who would pray (not wanting an Anglican to pray - to make it clear our nation would not be like England in which the Anglican church is the national church), a man was sent down the street to find the first Christian Minister he could, who was bought back to pray. Of note also, as a ‘secular’ nation the word ‘secular’ back then meant to be *of no particular Christian denomination*. The modern ‘secular’ myth is

therefore just that - a myth! It is a narrative that has been built. This nation is 'Christian' – if measured by our founding values, and if assessed in the light of history. This is still true – even though these values have been departed from in the areas of sexuality and 'value of life' in particular.

- Consider the stories of Ngakuku and Tarore. The young Tarore was murdered by enemy raiders, yet because of the new Christian message, Ngakuku decided to forgive the perpetrators for the murder of his daughter - rather than to get revenge, which was the cultural custom. The story (and others like it) was catalytic, being passed on by Māori as they travelled the length of these lands. The faith was then embraced by over half (some say as much as 80%) of all Māori – and as a group Māori remained more Christian (church attending – though possibly on the Marae) than Pākehā / non-Māori for a Century beyond that. Church attendance in NZ as a whole has never been higher than about 25%. It currently sits at about 16% - if 'regular attendance' is measured by once per month or more. Though 16% is likely a bit generous.

#6. The power of a personal statement

This chapter will be short. Its point is singularly that the same principle that has been articulated here regarding stories can also apply to our personal statements.

One key for faith-related communication in public places is the use of personal statements. These are statements that come from our hearts – stating what we personally think or believe, but without any inference or innuendo that we think anyone else should think or believe the same.

This might sound like an obvious point, not necessitating it's short chapter – but I encourage that you read on. The challenge this short book is seeking to address is the silence of many Christians when in secular environments. This is a problem because modern secularism is itself a religious belief system – with a full and complete value set that many like myself suggest is actually detrimental to human wellbeing – if history is considered. The contrast is the amazing values our faith gifted our society, which are specifically what positioned us to become one of the most prosperous, free, equality-based and charitable nations on the planet. With religious secularism in a place of dominance now in the public square, our faith is largely silenced, as also are the many stories from history that demonstrate the above contrast. The question is therefore, what can a person get away with saying as a personal statement – to bring balance –in contrast to the public pressure that exists to stay silent on spiritual things?

The contrast to a personal statement is, of course, a 'truth statement.' Some people think stating things personally – and not therefore directly as a truth statement, is a compromise. I don't see it this way. I suggest it's about sensitivity to others, phrasing things in a way that is gentle and respectful, in recognition of differences.

Regarding personal statements, it is normal to state our amazement at things that amaze us. It's also authentic and relational to do this.

As Christians, we often hide the spiritual dimension to how we feel or think when in secular or semi-hostile environments. My suggestion is that this 'hiding' isn't actually necessary. The difference is in the way we express what we say!

Consider that the same stars that amaze us also amaze the non-Christian. The same robots in the more than one trillion cells of our bodies that courier things around – called Kinesins – amaze non-Christians as much as they amaze us! So, if we state our views - even with the faith dynamic included as a personal statement, that can be acceptable and even appreciated in our society!

So, when we see an amazing sunset, we can state, *'Isn't that sunset amazing? It's as if God painted the sky!'*

To note it, the contrast is to other ways we could say the same thing. For example, *'I thank God for that amazing sunset!'* This might be acceptable – but feels a bit blunt to me, because a non-Christian couldn't agree with that statement, while they could agree with the prior wording of the same.

For a comparison, consider, *'Who could deny there is a God? Look at that sunset!'* This is a direct truth claim – which might leave a non-Christian feeling awkward.

My point is, most often Christians say nothing at all about how their appreciation of the sunset directly connects to their belief that God exists. The Christian instinctively desires to give God praise - and then says nothing. I'm saying we shouldn't be silent. It's about how we say what we say!

Finding our voice is therefore about wisdom and sensitivity.

I suggest that the 'skill set' part of this is exactly the same as has been mentioned earlier on regarding stories in secular places. While our first sentence might be a personal statement – including a reference to faith or spirituality, the second is a

more generalised question or statement that anyone could appreciate or agree with

Everyday comments and observations can then be opened up further by allowing our hearts to connect with the reality we see.

Regarding the sunset, *'...what's equally amazing to me is that we have eyes that can see all the colours. That wasn't needed for mere survival! Truly amazing!'*

Stating this would also likely be acceptable to a non-Christian friend standing next to me – though if I suspected the middle of the three short sentences might be misunderstood by an atheist I might say it with a smile or a wink. To note it, everyone can agree with the first and third sentences – because it is 'truly amazing' that we can see all the colours.

However, a new dynamic now arises because, what is it within us that causes us to even think about the miracle of our eyes, to feel wonder at what we see? The answer is by being both intellectually and emotionally alive. If we can set our mind and emotions free, there are amazing things around us all the time! We'll come back to this in a later chapter titled, 'Keys to being an intriguing person'.

Consider, when we see a new baby we could say, *'Isn't this thing totally amazing? I tell you, I can see no way all that information, and complexity, and the organs and everything else can fit in there, as perfectly as this – all working and looking gorgeous like this – without a man in the sky who made it. Babies are amazing. How beautiful!'*

A parent of any faith would appreciate that comment – which compliments the wonder and beauty of their child!

As a final comment here about authenticity – if we think being authentic is important, how authentic is it if we're silent about our faith? Given what we believe, our silence is not only dishonest. It is unloving toward others!

In our silence we also fail to recognise and glorify God in the way he deserves.

God also wants to be praised. As Jesus said, *'if they stay silent, even the rocks will cry out'* (Luke 19:40).

Creative personal comments, offered in a 'by the way' manner, can give due praise to God, while also being used by him to awaken a spark of faith or spiritual consciousness in others!

#7. With the worst of the worst (Our manner is our message)

This chapter is a bit longer than the others because of the illustrations I give. However, it is worth that extra time because it's the 'aggressive' or dogmatic few amongst various antagonistic sub-groups who intimidate many Christians into silence in the public square. (Culturally the message is that they get to speak, but we don't!)

How could we better deal with these aggressive or unknowingly prejudicial ones? If we could manage disagreement better, might we then be more confident to speak?

If more Christians speaking up is the goal, this is a genuinely important topic!

As noted earlier, at the present time I'm privileged to be involved with the Hope Project public media engagements in New Zealand. These seek to keep something of the 'Christ' in Christmas and Easter via public TV, web media, and also booklets. The booklets are delivered to most homes nationally just prior to Easter. Due to the nature and scope of these kinds of media engagements, I've had the privileged opportunity of engaging many atheists and agnostics (amongst others) in conversation across the past decade, probably counted in their hundreds.

As an observation, the grassroots reality is that these people have concluded their thoughts before the conversation started. They are not, therefore, interested in any facts or reason or rationality or logic – only unless it agrees with what they have already concluded. They often just want to be right – and to 'throw a stone'. These are difficult conversations!

I reflect on Jesus when engaging with hostile audiences. He 'deflected' hostile people more so than engaging with them. As he put it, *'don't throw your pearls to*

the swine' (Matthew 7:6). There is a time to simply decline to engage – while at other times finding a way to still say something positive is important!

To note it, we created a video-resource on this specific topic of 'conversational skills for hostile environments' (See Because We Care – series 3 – <https://altogether.co.nz/equipping-videos-members>). At just 5 minutes per video, with discussion guides provided, it's a valuable resource.

Let's look at a few tips for when engaging with these kinds of conversations and people.

Don't say too much early on: As defeatist as it might sound, I firstly suggest that we avoid having too much hope early on in a conversation with someone who's coming across very strongly, or who is antagonistic, that they will ever engage rationally. If we're eager for a rational conversation, we'll often be disappointed. The human heart is easily corrupted and hardened. In my experience very few will engage rationally – even though most will claim they are engaging rationally. I have found that taking an approach that is somewhat 'aloof' is therefore wise early on. Again – to consider Jesus' example - he 'engaged with the interested, intrigued the disinterested, and deflected the hostile'.

Investigate the motive: What we are wise to do is to give those we engage with the 'benefit of the doubt' - again and again. This is because all people matter! While Jesus deflected, his 'deflective statements' often also had a point. '*Why are you trying to trap me*' – highlighted their impure motives. '*Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's*' – answered their question provocatively, while it didn't give them a 'quote' they could hang (kill) him on, and it also made a powerful point on the limitation of Government powers! To the rich young man who was more arrogant than hostile, he said, '*Why do you call me good?*' and then '*Obey God's commandments*'. I suggest that both this question and later statement were purposed to investigate the rich young man's motives. It is only then that – having made his diagnosis – Jesus said, '*sell everything and give the money to the poor*'. Tragically, this was the specific advice that particular man needed at that time.

While Jesus did ‘deflect’ the hostile – what he did even while deflecting them was typically full of meaning!

Again, given what we believe about reality, God, faith, sin, salvation and eternity, it is only right that we engage in a manner that is sincere!

Adapt: As another general tip, we’re wise to be ready to adapt quickly. I’ve engaged with many people, for example, who were unable to admit that they could be wrong on any point. Not even one! To deflect, some will throw accusations at the person they’re talking with - name-calling. They’ll then change the topic repeatedly as a deflection tactic, saying, ‘*what about this?*’, or ‘*what about that?*’ When this happens, we have options. We are not obligated to have to answer their questions. In fact, we are sometimes wise to ignore them – because they are like a smokescreen, obscuring the real issue! For example, we could pull a conversation back to the first topic – ignoring their other questions, aware that their actions lack intellectual integrity. If appropriate, we could even try to gently point this out to them – thought that does run the danger of increasing the ‘argumentation factor’ if they are reactive. Alternatively, we could adapt – showing grace - addressing each new topic that they deflect with, one by one. Every conversation is different.

However, in the midst of this, when people are getting intense or emotional, we're wise to see that the real issue probably isn't what's on the surface in their words. It is instead in their hearts. It could be a hurt. It could be a doubt. Or it might be ‘plain old pride’! In their pride they are convinced of their view, genuinely believe ‘*I’m right and you’re wrong*’ – without need to actually think or investigate. In my experience of this, it’s like some people have a ‘brain block’. They are genuinely unable to think outside of what they’ve been told by someone else is true. Their perception, for example, that ‘science has proven’ a certain thing causes all rationality on the topic to leave the house. We are wisest to give grace, remembering that our goal is to ‘win people not just arguments’. We therefore adapt. We tell a story. We pose a thoughtful question – and we smile!

Don't take the various 'smoke screens' too seriously: Put differently, people questions are sometimes like a smokescreen for a decision they've made in their hearts – not their minds. They might also understand that those who ask the questions control the conversation – so they try to dominate the conversation by asking questions. In their insecurity, they feel a need to prove they are smarter than you also so they get personal with their words, attacking, criticizing and demeaning. This is about exerting dominance and superiority – and it comes from insecurity. A common 'power game' is to say *'the onus of proof is on you to prove your faith'*. They won't believe until we prove it! What they fail to see is that they are equally making a truth claim. (An 'onus of proof' is upon all who make truth claims!) As an example, they might say, *"Your beliefs are ridiculous. Show me a peer-reviewed article in a scientific journal that says God is real. You can't, can you?!"* These are simply power games – so we need wisdom and grace.

As a side point so it is noted - philosophy is at the foundation of science. What is true and real is not therefore defined by what can be proven scientifically, because many things exist that are non-material / not physical! Consider free will – which is nothing more than electrical impulses in the synapses of the brain if there is no God. Without free will, what is rationality – or moral responsibility – or beauty – or love? There are clearly many things that are real and true that are not material, which physical science cannot test or prove!

Stories often yield more positive results than reasoned arguments: When a conversation is going in circles – or simply ceases to be fun – I try to turn a conversation to stories– or to a question if I'm stuck for a story. When I present an argument (a reasoned thought) – I also try to do so in the context of stories and examples. A story that speaks to a topic can communicate clearly while being interesting. A simple illustration in a sentence can connect with an emotion. We can unite with a person in a sense of wonder created by a story!

For example, to continue the above example where a person says that only things that can be materially tested (or validated in a scientific journal) are true, *"I don't take what is or isn't in scientific journals as the definer of all truth. Science cannot*

prove love – while I enjoy being part of a loving family. I also once saw a man in bed for 9 years get up and walk as the result of being prayed for. An atheist would never write in their scientific journal about that – but I saw it! What about the evidence that suggests a spiritual realm exists?”

- Note that this is entirely comprised of personal statements with no ‘fact statements’
- The personal statements also connect to tangible experiences of being in a loving family and of seeing a miracle.
- As a whole, it points to the irrationality of saying truth is solely defined by what can be physically tested in material/physical science.
- The topics it touches open the conversation up considerably.
- It concludes with a question.
- (Were they to question that healing, I’d then instinctively think of a video of a healing, like of Jean Neal’s miraculous healing on YouTube. So I’d send them the link so they have a story they can then remember with their eyes! Jean is from the UK, was wheelchair-bound, and one day in a large church gathering was suddenly able to stand and run – and it’s all on video. If you search, beyond the short version there is also a 15 to 20-minute documentary by Cfan / Christ For All Nations that investigates and tells the wider story, including the testimony of doctors, friends, and family.)

Give compliments: I regularly compliment those I’m engaging with – like if they’ve made a good point or asked a good question. 'You seem to have thought a lot about this. I agree it’s important – well done!' This helps them to be reassured I’m not arguing with them – even if their tone is rude and argumentative. This serves to correct, or ‘moderate’, their rude behaviour. If they are personally insecure, this helps them feel better about themselves, so they aren’t as aggressive, domineering or bossy in their tone (those things being a cover for insecurity).

Ignore rude and distracting comments if their sincerity is in question: I choose to ignore many things that are said in various online conversations, as also many questions people ask. Once it's clear they are not sincere, or only want to be 'right', what's the point? I therefore step back to consider what I'd like to say, and then how. Consider Jesus when asked by what authority he did what he did. He replied to the question with a question – that didn't answer their question. *'John's Baptist – where did it come from? God or man? Answer my question, and I'll answer yours.'* That was clever, and God can give all of his children wisdom like that!

Jesus said, *"When you are brought before synagogues, rulers and authorities, do not worry about how you will defend yourselves or what you will say, for the Holy Spirit will teach you at that time what you should say"* (Luke 12:11-12).

Verbally reaffirm healthy boundaries: I refuse to ever engage in an argumentative manner. To help them 'chill out' I sometimes point out that I feel no compulsion to have to prove any point with them. *'It's a free world, right?!'* However, if they are interested in hearing a different perspective, I'm equally happy to engage.

This approach helps put people at ease. It also helps to calm things down if they're too intense or pushy. I've often had people who are coming across very strongly change their tone once some boundaries were put in place.

My encouragement, however, is that telling stories is the bulk of it! Story after story after story! They are the evidence. They are memorable. They are interesting, and if you are online and your story is brief – you never know how many people will read it! To illustrate:

"You might think everything that exists is just here because of a series of accidents. It's a free world – I have no need to change you. For me, the fact that our house exists tells me there was a builder."

Were they showing evidence of being a little informed – even if a bit emotional or antagonistic, I might state that longer as follows:

“Consider the many amazingly complex things we’ve discovered – like life – or the workings of the cell – or the fine-tuning of the universe. I can’t see how things this complex could ‘make themselves’ by accident! I’d be interested to hear how you make sense of that. Genuine question. As far as I can tell, there is no observable evidence or process for these claims (it’s the ‘historic sciences’ not ‘observable science’) – and the idea that accidents made them defies known laws of science like the second law of thermodynamics / the law of entropy. I have no problem with you believing something different from me. I just can’t see how saying ‘it was made as the result of a series of accidents’ is more logical than saying ‘this house exists because there was a builder’.”

Note:

- I never directly said they were wrong.
- I didn't directly claim everything was created either. There are no absolute truth statements in the above.
- Instead – as a *personal* statement, I said, “I can’t see how that can make sense.”
- Note the questions I raised and asked – inviting a response with a friendly, gentle manner.
- Note a few illustrations (stories) and examples are included – concluding with the simplest of these.
- Note also that the tone isn't argumentative – and in at least two parts of this I take time to 'reassure' them of the manner of my engagement. ('Genuine question', 'As far as I can tell...' 'I have no problem with you believing something different. I just can't see...').

When we're dealing with argumentative people, our manner is important because it can open the conversation up!

Look for what's in their heart: The question of a person's 'motives' and 'heart' are very similar – but they are different things in my view. Our wider challenge in these

conversations, as noted earlier also, is to find the real question behind all their questions. What thought or motive sits at the root of what we're seeing – being that an unyielding opinion held irrespective of any evidence presented, a mocking tone, or maybe evidence of them having strong emotions connected with their beliefs. However, beyond even the topic at hand, this is a person. This is a husband or wife, a daughter or parent. What is their real and deepest need? Who are they, as a person?

Why are they disinterested? Why are they defensive? Why do they have so much emotion attached to their beliefs and statements? Can they see that they are failing to engage in a logical manner? Are they able to see or admit they might have a personal prejudice guiding their thinking? Why do they have those prejudices? Illuminating these hindrances can be helpful. It might help them engage more rationally. It might bring a conversation back to planet earth – and it might connect with their heart.

I've had people who started by demeaning the Christian faith as irrational for whom it turned out that hypocrisy in the Church was their emotional driver – not a rational argument regarding truth. Any talk about science and reason would have been a waste of time because they might potentially have no problem believing there could be a God. The issue is more in the hypocrisy they perceive, which left them feeling convinced that religion causes more harm than good. 'All churches want is money from vulnerable people anyway, right?'

But what was behind that?

How about a guy who told me that his grandfather had been a preacher in a conservative church. Whenever he did wrong as a child he was made to sit in a corner and to read the Bible. He had become resentful as the result of an abusive spiritual authority! Here we are 50 years later and he has palpable anger regarding the Christian faith – while being financially broke, a sickness beneficiary and an out-of-control alcoholic. He wasn't someone who needed my disagreement, or any point proving. Yes – he was arguing, but what he needed was to see love!

When a person is intense or coming across very aggressively, a great thing to say and ask is, “You seem to feel very strongly about this – why is that?”

If they raise many questions in a row, we could say, *“You have raised some great questions. Could we look at them one by one? I’m happy to engage if you’re interested – but to note it, if you’re not interested, I have nothing to prove here. We’re allowed to have our different views!”* Or alternatively, *“You seem to have many questions. What’s behind this really? You seem almost motivated to try to show this faith to be irrational. Why is that so important to you?”*

All of these conversations are like peeling layers off an onion. You can only go layer by layer – but you do so with wisdom, knowing the most important conversation will relate to the heart.

However, if a person is simply rude, let me reaffirm again that there’s nothing wrong with politely declining a conversation. *“I’m very happy to discuss this – but there seems to be an amount of emotion in this conversation. I feel no obligation to prove anything, and I can’t see how a society can be a good society if we’re not able to tolerate differences. Thanks for sharing your thoughts. Sincerely – all the best.”*

I’ve had these kinds of conversations face-to-face and online. I don’t usually enjoy them – to be honest. However, I engage because all people matter! The tactic is to stay relaxed, tell a story, ask question – and sometimes to simply change the topic entirely, to try to ‘find’ the person, because they really must be more important to us than the topic at hand! (Consider the meaning of the following statement – said with a smile, *“I like you too much to talk about that with you!”*)

Always stay relaxed and smile: The final key is to keep smiling – carrying an attitude that is the antithesis of any tension arising from their rudeness or name-calling. I sometimes view a person’s emotions like those of a child, wanting to get their own way. I choose not to be intimidated by anger or attempts to dominate. My response is a choice – and not always automatic. In most cases, there is very little substance to people’s knowledge and arguments against our faith, when tested. Ours is a truly rational faith!

Remember our manner often is the message: We've worked out in our social media is that far more people watch these conversations than participate in them. Our manner really is as important as our arguments, if not more-so! People are making judgments about who we are, while listening to or watching our conversations. Being like Jesus in our manner and love is essential when representing him!

A word unwisely spoken often cannot easily be retracted.

We also remember that our conversation with a person is likely just one of many they will have. We are a 'step on a journey'. What impression did we leave?

To end this chapter with a positive story: A guy engaged with us online with the usual criticisms of our Christian faith, in response something in one of our public media efforts. Central to his objection to our faith was the problem of evil and suffering. He had all manner of critiques against our God. I replied by saying these were *'great questions, and sounded very much like those a man named Job asked in the Bible. He was super angry at God for sufferings he experienced – and fifty chapters record the whole event and conversation'*. His reply was *'I'd be interested in reading that'* – so we sent him a Bible.

He then continued with various questions and accusations against our faith - until I felt it had gone long enough. I simply said (something like), *"I feel we've engaged around your questions plenty. The real issue here is in the heart because there can be no end to our questions sometimes. If God is there, he can be found. How about simply calling out to him to ask him to reveal himself to you if he really is there."*

He went silent for a while – then when he next came back into the conversation, he commented in passing, *"It's amazing how different I feel since I decided to trust God, even though his whole existence still makes no sense to me."* In the last contact I had with him, he messaged me to let me know that he'd decided to start going to a local church, and was planning to visit a few near him to find one he

liked. Our conversations, reasoned explanations, and gentleness can answer questions, open doors, and make a difference for people!

Are we courteous, respectful, complementary, positive, rational, humble, honest?

Are we giving diligence to engage with people – no matter how unfriendly they might seem, because all people matter? Remember, ‘hurt people hurt people’.

When a person is rude or emotive – there is a reason. Wisdom can often calm them down. Wise questions can draw them out. In this manner God can work through us!

#8. Topical adaption when in conversation

Here is a brief one-and-a-half page revision – before a new point.

As a reminder, the goal in our conversations is to win people more so than to win arguments. Our manner is important because people will remember what we are like far more than they remember what we say – and Jesus' example of communication through stories and questions is a good one to follow.

Six types of stories for use in our conversations are as follows:

1. Stories from our own life experience
2. Stories from other people's life experience
3. Stories from the natural world (reason, logic, science)
4. Stories from our bicultural history
5. Stories from our values history
6. Stories from the Bible.

The question to consider is: Which type of story might best communicate with this person or group? What story might help or encourage them on their journey? No conversation can cover everything!

It's also worth noting that Jesus engaged in a gentle and adaptive manner – helping people to take their next step forward in faith. If we observe Jesus in conversation, he engaged every conversation differently because every person is different! As a pattern ...

- He engaged with interested people
- But only sought to intrigue the disinterested
- While he deflected the hostile!

This is to say, he didn't always engage directly or openly. He considered his audience – and shared what he believed was needed for their next step.

With hostile and mixed audiences, a different skill-set then comes into play. Consider that Jesus sometimes went silent – like when asked what to do with the woman caught in adultery. Consider also that Jesus often told stories *that he never explained* to the crowds – only later to his disciples (Matthew 13:34, John 16:29-30, John 4:34).

Regarding an approach to storytelling, for Christian messages in secular places I've suggested the following pattern:

1. Identifying a relevant story that can be used to make a point that the audience will agree with – yet that also has a secondary message that educates or can broaden perspective regarding matters of faith, history or hope.
2. To conclude with a, '*...and what I learned was...*' statement about the point on which you and your audience will agree.
3. Then optionally add a question to open the conversation up again.

We are thereby able to impart messages about our faith connected with reason or history or experience, while doing so in a manner that is suitable to our environment. And this is important because every story heard affects a perspective! Our engagement matters because people matter!

There is an area of topical adaption, regarding reasons for faith, that needs brief mention. If we including references to spiritual things within our stories in secular places, as people's spiritual consciousness is awakened – or given permission to exist - spiritual conversations will likely then come about. Wisdom to engage those conversations is therefore going to be needed.

Conversations are led by questions. When our conversations are engaging around matters of faith, it is sometimes wise that we intentionally redirect a conversation.

The point here is to encourage that we be intellectually awake in our conversations, and also confident to take initiative to change the direction of the conversation if logic of a conversation isn't making sense.

An example: In my experience, a statement of scepticism toward the reliability of the Bible is unlikely to be reflective of any actual knowledge – because the Bible can objectively be shown as one of the most reliable records of history anywhere. (I encourage the reader to view video #2 and then booklet #2 in the 'Why Christians believe Christianity to be true' series at WhyChristiansBelieve.nz).

This begs the question, what's actually going on here? Why the scepticism? It dawns upon us that the motivation behind our culture-wide attack on the Bible has had practically nothing to do with the Bible at all. It has instead been about one thing: A scepticism of miracles! That is the actual issue!

However, that question about miracles comes from another question. Namely, does a God and/or a spiritual realm exist? If a God – or even just a spiritual realm of some kind, does exist, then miracles are possible. It is that simple.

So, a question about the Bible's reliability (as a record of history) would wisely be turned to a discussion about miracles – which if they deny their existence is actually a discussion about the existence of a God or a spiritual realm! Only when they accept the possibility of a God will they accept the possibility of miracles – in which case, the question isn't whether or not the Bible is reliable. Miracles can happen! The question is instead whether or not there is sufficient evidence to suggest a miracle did actually happen!

Being intellectually awake, so we can see or perceive logic gaps in conversations is therefore important. When we find these gaps we can investigate. A lot of time can otherwise be spent in discussions that do not really go anywhere.

An example: Someone recently questioned me about the reliability of various predictions in the Bible after reading something I wrote about fulfilled prophecies. Despite evidences given to them (e.g. Psalm 22 and Isaiah 53), he remained

resolute in arguments that there must be another explanation. I realised at that point that the conversation was pointless. He didn't trust the Bible – because he doubts miracles happen – because he doubts that a God exists. So I gave my time to engaging around evidences there is a God, rather than discussing the Bible's predictions.

An example: Likewise someone engaged me recently around evolution, with a firm belief that accidents and long periods of time together could 'create' amazing and complex things. They truly believed this to be rational. However, it was pointless to discuss the details offered because we know that mutations, even where they very rarely might do something positive, do not create the kind of information necessary for new biological features. A quick look at DNA shows the nature of what needs writing. In short, there is no process by which a naturalistic (no God) evolving of entirely new species-types could take place. So, what's the point in debating 'fringe details'? As an illustration, if we know there is no trunk or roots, why debate the twigs and leaves? I therefore redirected the conversation with questions and some short illustrations.

Emotional drivers: While we have covered emotional background motives already, this example might be useful. To jump back to the example given two paragraphs above, consider then the possibility that an argument against God might be rooted in something entirely unrelated to all of the above. Consider someone who is angry at God because their mother died of cancer when they were young. If God is loving, he could have saved their mother, and he didn't! The strength of their emotion is, therefore, the product of pain – not rational thought. The topic, therefore, just changed again!

For me, in this situation, I'd hope to (1) somehow show empathy (2) while maybe reassuring of the love and empathy of the Christian God if possible (noting this is a God who joined our sufferings as Jesus). While it is possible that (3) a conversation might still then shift to the problem of evil and suffering at a rational level, that would be unusual. There are real questions here that have few answers when a

person is suffering. A story again – like a personal testimony, or the testimony of a friend, reflecting God’s help, might be more relevant.

An emotional driver: For a final example – only because it might be interesting, consider someone interested in a girl in a church, who’s investigating the faith out of an obligation from her. Without wanting to embarrass anyone, I have conversations with three different people related to this scenario in my life. Again, we engage with hope, but also with awareness that behind all the questions there is a motive quite unrelated to them. They like a girl! We therefore seek God for his wisdom – as in all situations. We engage, we show love, we encourage.

Being adaptive in conversation is important. I think our ability to do so strengthens as we become more intellectually alive also – and as we become more emotionally mature and secure. As we continue to grow and learn as people we can become more effective as encouragers of faith and hope – in all circumstances!

By the way, here are some useful questions, to uncover things that might sit behind people’s first comments or questions:

- Why do you ask?
- Why do you think that?
- Where did you get that idea from?
- You seem to be really convinced of this idea. Why is that?
- What led you to this conclusion?

The real conversation is usually in the ‘second’ ‘third’ or even ‘fourth’ layer of the onion!

#9. Being authentic – without undue agenda

This chapter is included in this book because, even with the above skills understood and learnt, if a Christian is engaging with an express motive or expectation that others will then respond and come to faith, as ironic as it sounds, that hidden agenda can undermine their otherwise-well-meaning efforts.

Authenticity: The importance of authenticity cannot be understated. This needs discussion, and to note another irony, even intentional teaching! I think all people understand that we should ‘keep it real’ when we engage with others. The challenge here is that the culture that is within us each is a powerful thing.

Consider that we might engage in witnessing because we feel we’re supposed to. This is something we shouldn’t do only because we’re supposed to! For our witness to be authentic, it needs to come out of genuine love and concern. But what if we feel both love for people and also an obligation to engage – ‘because we are supposed to’? This might affect our manner!

When we’re trying to do what we’re supposed to do, words are more difficult to find. This is because we’re trying to perform as if in a theatre – doing the right thing, to make something happen. However, when we’re more comfortable in our own skin – acting out of love – our minds are likely to be more relaxed, alert, and alive. In this state of being words are more likely to come naturally. These are challenging dynamics, connected to the very core of who we are, our self-concept, our perception of others, and also our current emotional health.

Authenticity and adaption: Considering our audience is also important for authenticity. Being authentic doesn’t mean I don’t need to adapt to relate better to different types of people. In fact, if I’m authentically caring, I will adapt to be able to relate better and show care to different types of people!

For some people, with authenticity – their accent even changes when they talk to people of different racial and linguistic backgrounds. This is about adapting, to be understood and to connect. The way I spoke English changed when I lived in Asia – including grammar in sentences. My wife adapted far more though – including in the way she waved her arms when talking! Being authentic doesn't mean we don't adapt.

Word selection: Another consideration is language – in terms of the words we use. If a person doesn't go to church, our church lingo is often not suited to them. Consider the idea of being 'washed in the blood of the lamb'. While we might understand this to mean 'Jesus taking care of our sin so we don't get the punishment we deserve,' they hear about a terrifying animal sacrifice, in which the blood is put all over a person – as if that somehow made them clean. It's a disgusting idea!

We therefore need to develop a filter in all of our talking, to remove the words or sayings we might use in a church that won't make sense to a non-church person. Jargon can be really off-putting! The same also applies when speaking to people of different racial backgrounds, as we come to an understanding of their various cultural norms.

Boundaries: However, I think the key dynamic to being authentic is simply about being comfortable in our own skin. We're not performing or trying to be anything that we're not – while we're equally confident to adapt, to relate well to another person. It's about relating out of who we are – without pretence.

It follows that, if we are living life in an authentic manner, we will want other people to be able to live and relate the same way. We will therefore respect differences, and boundaries, in the way we relate to others. For example, it is not appropriate to try to change people or to speak in a manner that somehow 'pushes' things on them. That kind of approach isn't respectful. The caution here is therefore against putting undue pressure on people in our eagerness to see them thinking about or considering an idea.

However, it would concurrently lack authenticity if we did not try to engage a conversation with them, right? The love of God surely compels us to do so!

Removing the agenda: A small revelation, therefore, appears. If we have an agenda in a relationship to somehow see the other person changed, that's not entirely healthy! For the comparison, to have a hope that they might one day change, is fine – so long as we accept that we have no right or ability to make that happen. When these boundaries are in the right place, it affects the way that we engage.

Imagine we want to see someone become a Christian. That's not actually our right to decide, correct? Also, if we do have a have an agenda to tell them something and then to encourage them to change – which could be respectful and authentic – this might still feel like pressure to them. Our motives will unavoidably be reflected in the way that we speak and act! They will be able to feel that we want something from them. As Jesus said, 'out of the overflow of the heart, the mouth speaks' (Luke 6:45).

The lesson here is to remove the agenda of changing someone – even while authentically hoping that day might yet come. We respect their autonomy – and we therefore engage in a way that respects their boundaries, with no attempt to convince or coerce – certainly encouraging faith, but also never wanting them to make any decision that is not entirely free and their own. We accept from the outset that we have no right or power to change them. The difference this makes is in our manner – which affects our tone – and it really does make a difference!

For me, this little revelation helped me to become a lot more confident in all my conversations. Combined with a revelation on the 'power' of questions within conversations, it was a turning point! Once properly understood, I could never fail. It also released me to say what I thought more clearly and winsomely – because there was genuinely no hidden innuendo or desire behind the words. If I ever felt they might question my motives, I'd bluntly state what my motives and boundaries were – and weren't, so there could be no confusion or doubt. I've been amazed at

the directions and also distance that this little key has enabled various conversations to go since then! It freed me to be more ‘me’ within the conversation. What did I want to say or ask?

None of us has the right to force any person to think about something they don’t want to think about! None of us has the power to make anyone a Christian! If we can accept this from the start it can be very freeing both for us and those we engage with.

As a final little tip, sometimes we are wise to ask permission to say some things before we say them. We do this not because we’re saying something wrong – but because we’re aware that our motives in what we’re saying might be misinterpreted. For example, *“I actually have an opinion on this matter. Can I share it with you – but to be clear, I’m not expecting you to have to agree with me. Is that ok?”* They then give you permission – and feel comfortable because they know you understand the needed boundary. This approach can open the way for us to say things that might not otherwise be said.

The idea of ‘removing the agenda of changing people,’ while still intentionally engaging people in conversations, is a key that I have seen bring freedom to the ‘witness’ of many people. Many had felt otherwise stuck in their witnessing conversations, because they felt obligated to speak – and that is why they didn’t know how. That feeling of obligation is also why when they did speak, their words carried a tone that wasn’t comfortable for them or the other person. They were trying to be something they felt they were supposed to be – instead of being free.

Do you authentically love God? I suspect you do!

We cannot change other people – but we are allowed to talk with them!

#10. The importance of brevity

I'd better keep this point brief. The key to great conversations is great questions. It follows that one of the biggest killers of conversations is when we over-talk.

One of the great dangers of storytelling is that we might become long-winded in our stories. We've all talked with people who are!

People love to hear a story as an anecdote – especially if it's told in 30 seconds or three sentences. They'll likely stay attentive if it is one minute long too – but beyond that, it better be a good story and well-told!

Storytelling is, therefore, an art. It requires practice – because in conversation, a good story is also a short story!

A good story is, however, one that the other person can relate to. The length you'll get away with is significantly contingent on how interesting you and your topic might be to the other person. We, therefore, need to be able to read those we are talking with. For example, if I tell you about the water tank I just installed, learning various things about pressure pumps and plumbing along the way – it is interesting to me right now, but I expect you'd be quickly bored!

So, what might make it interesting? Well – firstly, there's no reason I need to tell you anything at all about my water tank installation at all. It's not actually important! However, were I to tell you something about it, I'd need to find something within the story that you might relate to. I'll illustrate in the next chapter.

The key to a great story is, therefore, more than (a) our authenticity in the story. It's also in (b) our ability to discern what might interest the other person, (c) then also in our ability to tell the story well and briefly. And it's then also in (d) the 'punch line' or question we put on the end – which was explained to me years back as the '*What I learned was...*' statement or question. That final statement or question explains the point of our whole story. It tells the audience why you told it.

I've had a lot of practice at telling stories. For me, the ability to tell a story briefly is enabled by seeing what the main point within a story is. To put that differently, what is it in this story that amazes me, that I want to pass on? When I know what that one thing is, I'm then able to tell the story briefly because I only include the details necessary to communicate that one point. Until I've worked out what that one thing is, I'm not capable of being concise in the same way. To evidence this point, a story that could take 5 minutes or an hour to tell if all details were included can, therefore, be told even within a minute.

If you'd like to see some examples of this, I have created over 130 '*A minute in history with the Hope Project*' radio pieces thus far. Each is literally one minute – to the second. They are not easy to write, but they demonstrate what is possible. Each story needs context – requiring 10 to 20 seconds. Maybe a person needs introducing, with their name, the location, and the time period in which they lived. The main story about what they did needs telling in just 20 to 30 seconds – with the significance of that explained in just 5, and then a closing sentence in the same (5 seconds) length to wrap it up nicely for radio use.

- See HopeProject.co.nz/a-minute-in-history
- Stories, with substance, can be told in one minute!

Regarding how much we talk – as a rule of thumb in conversation, it is said that we should ask two questions for every one that we are asked. If we're telling stories – how about the idea that we listen to two stories for every one that we attempt to tell?

People like people who listen more than they talk!

Not talking too much is important.

#11. How to tell a story that actually communicates something

(A core point in this series)

This chapter expands upon and illustrates principles discussed earlier in this book, to ensure they are now clear.

Imagine you asked me what I did last weekend. I'd need to answer authentically, correct? Well, I put a water tank on our property! In the previous thought, I told you the details were boring. Here's how I'd naturally tell you about it. Then we'll break down my small story. (By the way, this is how I'd naturally talk because, while writing this, I simply wrote out what I'd naturally say if asked that question. No preparation needed).

"I put a water tank in and had a real problem with the pressure pump. I simply couldn't get it to hold pressure – until I eventually worked out that it didn't have a backflow valve to stop the pressure going back up through the pipe to the water tank. My lack of knowledge left me stuck for ages, and I even fiddled with the electronics of the thing – which put me in serious danger of wrecking it! But I learned something: When we're doing new things, it's wise to seek good advice, right?"

Now, I admit that's not the most interesting story in the world – but it is an authentic every-day answer to the question, 'What did you do last weekend?'

1. **Connection** – As boring as that water tank installation might be, the above is mildly interesting because it makes me the 'butt of the joke.' It connects to an experience everyone will relate to (nearly stuffing something up – due to a lack of knowledge or advice).
2. **Length** – The story is also approximately 1 minute in length. I know that the details that are interesting to me are unlikely to matter to you – so I chose not to tell you them.

3. **Made relevant through the ‘What I learned was...’ statement** – The closing statement puts into practice what was mentioned again in the prior thought. A story is turned toward something meaningful in communication by adding a last sentence that tells the other person what we learned from our experience. This makes the story ‘topical’ with regard to a broader lesson (seeking good advice) – rather than limiting the story to the specific topic (water tanks). Very few people can relate to installing a water tank. Everyone can relate to doing something dumb because they didn’t seek advice!
4. **A question** – A question added to the end invites the other person to now make their contribution to the conversation. This is how conversations work – a bit like tennis, with the ball going back and forth across the net.

To note it – I didn’t edit the above little story to create this illustration. I simply wrote what I’d naturally say. So the question at the end was also by instinct – the point here being that earlier in life I wouldn’t have instinctively done the same. Conversational skills can be learned. There was a point at which I realised I was weak conversationally so I decided to become intentional in the way I asked questions. This also included a habit of changing certain statements into questions if I felt there might be tension or disagreement in a room on a particular matter. (This is something I learnt from Jesus, from looking at how he avoided the traps of his opponents, where they tried to get him to say certain things from a desire to get him killed).

To consider my question above – my example is a very weak question in that it’s almost rhetorical (not requiring an answer) – because the obvious reply is, ‘Yes!’. However, were I to pause, I could imagine someone I was talking with having a comment to make. Or I could restate the question.

The above topic could easily be expanded with an repeated question like, *“Have any of you stuffed anything up lately?”* In all likelihood that would open a conversation up!

If we wanted to get really spiritual about it, consider this question – for amusement. *“So, given that none of us have lived a full and meaningful life on planet earth yet, who would be in a position to give us advice on how we should do that?”*

That’s obviously a cheeky question – and a bit cheesy to be honest – because not everything has to be spiritual. Concurrently though, authenticity combined with a fun attitude is a key to great conversations.

For a more sensible question, *“Have you ever watched someone else stuff something up and wished you could have been there to give them some good advice?”*

To wrap this one up: While storytelling is powerful, telling a good story that also says something meaningful is an art. It needs to be (1) interesting - considering the audience, (2) brief, and then (3) to make a point – like by adding the ‘What I learned was...’ concluding question or statement. (4) The question we ask then determines where the conversation goes next - remembering that the key to great conversations is great questions!

As we become conscious of these dynamics in our conversations and storytelling, it is only natural that we will improve.

This can strengthen our ability to communicate well and relate meaningfully to all manner of people – in contexts that are both friendly and somewhat hostile toward our faith.

#12. Achieving respect in the midst of disagreement

While this chapter is not on storytelling itself it is included because difficulties in spiritual conversations are what sometimes causes people to shy away from ever starting those conversations. Some tips on how we might keep our conversations relaxed might therefore be relevant. Here are some tips.

We disagree with ideas, not people: To maintain a respectful tone in our conversations, one key is to disagree with people's ideas – rather than disagreeing with them as a person. For example, instead of saying, “You are wrong”, we say, “Those ideas are wrong.”

But it's possible to do a lot better than that!

Personal statements: As noted prior, it's also helpful to sometimes state our views as personal opinions. For example, instead of saying “Those ideas are wrong”, we say, “I'm not personally convinced about those ideas” or “For me, I've often wondered if...”

The art of a parallel and only vaguely connected story: I learned quite a bit about how to ‘disagree without disagreeing’ during my 9 years living in Asia. It was impolite in the culture to disagree with someone who was older – or wealthy. This comes from the very obvious truth that if people are old or wealthy it unequivocally must follow that they are wise. (That was a joke of course – and my Asian friends would be smiling).

Westerners – as a stereotype, are far more prone to openly state their disagreement with something than an Asian is. However, to make the point, an Asian is just as prone to disagree as anyone else is. It's just that they do it differently! (The silence doesn't mean agreement!)

The point is, you're not supposed to cause an older person or a person in a position of authority to 'lose face'. So, how do you disagree without ever having disagreed? It's an art form! It also requires patience – which is in contrast to the Western mind which is more inclined to simply call something that is rubbish, rubbish!

To put words to this 'artform' that I attempted to learn – to begin, it was about removing words like *"but"* or *"I don't agree"* from the vocabulary. Even words like *"a better idea would be..."* were too pointed. This would disrespect the other person - causing them to 'lose face'. Instead, you might say, *"I see real strengths in that idea! [Long pause.] I once saw an organisation that..."* You then tell a story that includes a different idea or approach – but you are wise to never state it directly, to instead leave room for others to digest what you've said for themselves. It may or may not be that a more senior person in the room then sees something wise in what you've said, in which case they might have 'a new idea' that they then state – to which you then reply, *"What a great idea!"*

It's a skill set – and I have to say I don't think I was very good at it. But by making mistakes a thousand times in a row, I do believe I learned something.

To note it – the skill set above was largely therefore about storytelling, exactly like this series is promoting. The art was in telling a story that made a point. Within that story, the intended point was then made as a side point – almost indirectly, rather than as the main point. It is an art!

Manner: Ultimately, maintaining a culture of respect in the midst of disagreement is about exuding a gentle, respectful, and friendly approach – that does all it can to avoid direct disagreement while reassuring the other person in case they feel insecure because of the disagreement. It is about adopting a posture that allows conversations to open up – and it's about taking an approach that avoids potential misunderstandings! And if our goal is to win people, not just arguments, it's a skill set we're going to be motivated to learn!

Grace: People won't always be kind or polite. Some will be disagreeable. Some will be rude toward those with different beliefs than their own. The modern 'woke'

crowd is an easy current example. They are often intolerant and judgmental – while ironically (and falsely) accusing anyone who disagrees with them of being intolerant and judgmental. (For clarity on the matter, it's not intolerant to disagree. Tolerance is about how we treat people no matter how much we disagree! Also, to judge a person's character just because they hold a different view is actually judgmental – and it is judgementalism of the worst kind).

However, what is clear is that if we reply in a like manner it won't help or prove anything. Like Christ, we are asked to 'turn the other cheek' – to forgive a perceived wrong, and to show all grace. If we do this our conversations will last longer and go further.

Additionally – as already noted – years later, a person might remember nothing of what we said while remembering a whole lot about what we were like!

We, therefore, hold two things in tension. The law of love that obligates us to speak of our faith – and an awareness of our environment which necessitates good people skills to achieve that. As the Apostle Paul said, *“Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect...”* (1 Peter 3:15).

For a final word on this, in one of the 'Because We Care' video series videos (Series 2 – Video #4 – <https://alltogether.co.nz/equipping-videos-members>) we cover the topic, 'How to disagree without disagreeing'. In summary, you sandwich your disagreement with two compliments – and then possibly also change the disagreeable statement in the middle into a question.

An example of the technique: I'm sitting right now with a view of a road and cars driving past – so here's a random example, *“I love that you're so passionate about cars! Regarding the idea that the Holdens are better than Fords, I have to say I think there's been a lot of experience there in America perfecting their cars – but, look, there's no question Holden has made some truly amazing cars!”*

If you consider what has been said here – while I am disagreeing with their claim that Holden is better than Ford, I've also complimented them twice, so there is no real reason for them to feel threatened.

This 'sandwich' technique is easy to remember and apply!

I hope these tips can help. Certainly for me, my confidence to initiate conversations has grown only in proportion to my confidence to then manage those conversations. While there is skill involved in initiating certain conversations – there is equally skill involved in knowing how to navigate them. For people to gain confidence it is likely that people will need to grow in these two skill sets concurrently.

Maintaining an 'environment' of respect within disagreement is possible. Helping other people to chill out when they get too intense is sometimes necessary – and is also possible, with rare exception. And these are skill sets that we can learn!

#13. Keys to becoming an intriguing person

I feel this idea needs more unpacking before we finish – so we'll make this the final chapter before a short conclusion, and then my list of my 'go-to' stories.

The foundational principle of this chapter is very-much where this short book began. Beliefs lead to behaviour. Or as Jesus put it, 'out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks' (Luke 6:45).

Once we've surrendered to the idea that we really can't change people, we can develop a new confidence in stating our views creatively. We do this with freedom – knowing we're not called to change other people. We also do this with an awareness that our words and stories might potentially intrigue them to think new thoughts – which could make a difference in their lives. The irony here is that, by 'not trying as hard,' we sometimes become more effective. Put differently, by saying things that might intrigue others, but with an attitude that does not expect them to be intrigued – we potentially become more intriguing!

With practice (to note the irony), we can become more comfortable with letting ourselves be ourselves within a conversation – while understanding the natural boundaries of good conversation, like brevity in stories and asking questions. We, therefore, engage authentically – more confidently – and this can actually make us more interesting to be around!

To state something that is very simple but also genuinely important: What makes an intriguing person intriguing is the fact that they are intrigued! Nothing more. Nothing less. It's the authenticity of their intrigue that puts the 'interest factor' into their words – which makes you feel intrigued.

If we want to become better at communicating things with other people through our conversations it therefore follows that...

- the key to intriguing people is to be genuinely intrigued;
- the key to being interesting is to be genuinely interested;
- and the key to being compelling is to be genuinely compelled!

And – by the way – a key to not being too serious and boring is to smile, while being careful to listen more than you talk. And the true key to smiling is to let yourself see that there is a bright side to life – because then the smile is natural, and a natural smile always beats a fake one!

What then is it to be intrigued? What does that actually mean?

A person who is intrigued is free and alive in themselves to be able to both (a) emotionally connect with and (b) intellectually connected with something is genuinely amazing! That's what 'being intrigued' is.

To state that again, to be intrigued, we need to set both our intellect and emotions free. It's an ability to perceive something is amazing – combined with an ability to also feel it!

Consider that the reason we say, "Wow!" at something is because we comprehended something at both an intellectual and emotional level. ('Wow' – that simple point is amazing!)

We need an illustration!

Consider the delight of a child when interacting with something simple but amazing – like a butterfly they just caught in a net. For the adult who is with the child, engaging with the child who has the butterfly is often more interesting than watching the butterfly, right? And where does the child's delight come from? They can both perceive (intellectually) that they are looking at something amazing – and feel it! Hence the squeal of delight when the butterfly moves.

Consider when adults watch children play a game. It's not the children's game they are following – as much as it is the children's emotions and antics within the game, right? We're engaging with the child's child-like ability to live in the moment

without a care or worry in the world. That's the attractive and interesting dynamic – and it's a dynamic we can lose with age!

As we lose that ability to be 'free in the moment,' we lose the ability to be intrigued – and with it to be intriguing!

So, to become more interesting as people we need to have things we're genuinely interested in – and beyond the Bible too, if I can make that point please.

It's often said that God wrote two books that reveal himself. One is the Bible, while the other is his creation – the natural world. There's plenty to allow yourself to be amazed about or surprised by in this world!

While for the non-Christian, to note it, there is a third book that God reveals himself through. It is you – through your life and example as a Christian to those who know you!

Of course, the opposite of being intriguing is to be boring. Reflecting on this can help also.

Consider a story or joke you once told that everyone laughed at. Then consider the next time you said the same joke – expecting everyone to laugh – but they didn't! What was different? It wasn't the joke. It was you! (Though if you think it might have something to do with the context, please do feel free to go and tell that same joke again in half a dozen different contexts just in case.)

This is why watching children tell jokes is usually funnier than the joke itself. They are trying to be funny – which contributes to why the joke doesn't work, and that's also why we find them funny.

The same applies when you or I try to re-tell jokes. Once we know the punchline, the surprise is gone. As a result, when we tell the joke a second and third or twentieth time, something of our own authenticity within the joke is no longer there in the same way. This is the human dynamic that sometimes stops even a truly funny joke from being funny when told.

The point is that the same dynamic applies to Christian witness – affecting the telling of a story, or even an explanation of the core message and invitation of the Christian faith. If it's 'on rote' like a performance, or something 'we're supposed to say,' it's unlikely to connect! To bring surprise, we need to feel surprised. For a conversation to be alive, we need to be genuinely present within the conversation. To bring interest, we need to be genuinely interested. And to bring a sense of conviction, we need to feel genuinely convicted!

A comment on age needs making here. Age can be a factor that makes it hard for some people to feel truly interested or excited about something. The experiences of life can have the effect of 'dulling' us sometimes. We've maybe seen too many sunsets. We've been through too many challenging experiences. We've become jaded. What I want to suggest is that we can change! It's possible to find joy in a sunset again – and if we feel we can't make that change, God can help!

In balance to this point though, I note that being old can give us a lot of empathy. This also can be a connection point with others, asking questions, listening, showing care, and then speaking encouragement into their lives. Our topic here is however about how we might restore our communication of Christian messages into semi-hostile and prejudicial environments, so we will stay on topic.

So, if you want to be a better witness for Jesus in dark places, one thing I'd encourage you to do is to go and look at a sunset – and let yourself be amazed at the light diffracting, the distance it came from the sun, the various stages of different sunsets possible in one evening, the range of colours and shapes in the clouds – and so much more! Go look at those unwanted ants walking through your house and consider the multiple organs that are somehow inside their minute bodies, all miraculously working – digesting food, breathing – while they navigate your house, smelling pathways marked by scent that has been left behind by others, while working as a part of a multifaceted community that is living somewhere in your house – all without your permission. That ant is hugely complicated! In all your brilliance, you couldn't make an ant! And it's a story about

the wonder of this creation that would be truly interesting to listen to - were you to tell it because you're genuinely interested!

Or how about the fact that, because our planet is spinning right now, you're currently traveling at thousands of kilometres per hour through space – while somehow not being flung off the ground and out into space. Isn't that amazing?! To me, the fact that we have no sense of this movement while this is happening is equally amazing – and so much so that it almost seems as if this whole environment were perfectly planned and made for us! Is that amazing, or what?!

In conclusion, a key dynamic within conversation and storytelling is authenticity. If we can be alive on the inside – in both our intellect and emotions – we're equipped to tell stories about things that we find interesting in a way that is genuinely interesting to listen to!

It is as Jesus said, *“Out of the overflow of the heart, the mouth speaks”* (Luke 6:45).

Stories can be used to say all manner of things. With wisdom – stories can be told that have secondary, 'by the way' meanings. This can help us to bring Christian messages to 'secularised' places in appropriate ways.

So, let's be intellectually alive – and emotionally connected, because this is what puts 'us' in the story – and that's what brings the story to life!

#14. A practical exercise for small groups that brings our learning together

The exercise explained in this final chapter is a fitting conclusion for this book.

A group that engages with the below activity a few times is also likely to understand the contents of this book better than someone who read this book three times. Educational theory suggests that we remember 10% of what we hear, 40% of what we say and 70% of what we do.

The below exercise is taken directly from our 'Why Christians believe Christianity to be true' video series' discussion guides. The exercise brings together learning we might have done about (a) reasons for faith then translated for public consumption through (b) the kind of storytelling skills this book has been about.

An exercise

List some objections related to an area of our faith or belief, then consider the three questions below.

1. What possible points could you make in response to this question?
2. What stories or illustrations could you briefly insert into your conversation (ideally with humour) to communicate these points in an interesting yet gentle way?
3. What questions could you ask that might also help to make these same points, or to open discussion around them?

Part 2: Practice in pairs:

In pairs, raise possible objections relating to today's topic. Then take turns to engage each other in a role-play type of conversation in which one person seeks to suggest a new way of seeing things through the use of cheerfully stated short stories and questions.

Closing words: A leadership thought - toward a CULTURE of application

If long-term results, by way of group members who embrace a habit of intelligent Christian witness in secularised places, is of interest to you, habits build culture not one-off programmes!

- There would therefore be value in repeating the above activity for 2 to 4 weeks *of every year* in every church small group and youth group!
- From a leadership point of view, this repeated pattern would feed into a culture of wise engagement. It could help you to restore a knowledge of reasons for faith, while also building an increased confidence for witnesses into your church or group through their acquisition of needed skill sets. By this means you can see take same knowledge connecting with your community!

Habits will achieve more for a leader than any array of great programmes, ideas and messages that are applied one time.

Next learning

If a clearer understanding of why we believe our faith to be true interests you, please see our 'Why Christians believe Christianity to be true' video-booklet-discussion series. This is free online at WhyChristiansBelieve.nz.

If an approach of leading change through habits that build culture interests you, some additional simple leadership habits for building ***a culture that is confident in the rationality of our faith*** are listed at <https://alltogether.co.nz/rationalfaith>.

Regarding habits that might build into ***a culture of competence in everyday conversational outreach*** please see <https://alltogether.co.nz/pastors>.

While the leadership approaches suggested here are very simple, they have profound potential to shape culture across a 3 to 5 year period, positioning you for a different set of results.

We hope this series has been helpful.

If you have any feedback, I'd love to hear it. dave@shininglights.co.nz

Appendices #1:

Examples of stories

As promised, here are some of the sources I go to for quick stories and illustrations.

1. Stories from our own life experience

For myself, I quickly have stories on family troubles, hurt, the power of forgiveness, injustice, emotional health and ill health, anxiety, the time inner healing takes, healthy emotional boundaries, faith, provision, risk, vision, planning, strategy, choices and more.

There are then many hundreds of possible interesting ‘anecdotal’ stories we all have that might connect with a wider life experience. Many of these can become a powerful communication tool if combined with a good ‘*What I learnt was...*’ statement. For example, “*I once went around a corner too fast in my car in the wet...*” (You’re interested already, right?)

A relevant personal story is therefore sometimes found by identifying the *wider* topic – to find something that conceptually (rather than directly) connects. To illustrate the thinking - if the topic is how to repair a broken chair, I’ll think about the wider question of how to repair a broken life or heart or relationship. Forgiveness is one possible example. A life-story quickly comes to mind – connected to repairing a chair. “*God made us to be whole – but life can ‘break’ us.*” The gentle message? “*No matter the situation, it is still possible to put the pieces of our lives back together, to make something beautiful!*”

The key to all these stories being interesting is in their clarity and brevity. What is the *one* thing you are wanting to tell about?

➤ Certainly 20+ stories if not 500!

2. Stories from other people’s life experience

If I couldn’t think of a forgiveness story from my own life, I certainly can from others. Consider Rob’s story – abducted at age 12 by the Germans, to then be forced into their service, clearing dead does from buildings and battle sites through World War two. When the war ended he was consumed with anger – but through a connection with God found strength to forgive, enabling peace and freedom within his own life. It’s a powerful story!

This is one of the stories in this video testimony series. GREAT personal stories that point to faith and hope aren't hard to find! Add to that the life-stories of various people from history I've read about.

- [30 stories](https://10DayChallenge.co.nz/stories) - 10DayChallenge.co.nz/stories

3. Stories from the natural world (reason, logic, science)

I wrote the below 7-part series booklet specifically to give an overarching reason for believing our faith to be true. I tried to communicate through concise stories, illustrations and quotes wherever possible. It is therefore full of stories and illustrations, concisely written, all supporting why we believe this faith to be true!

- [100+ stories](https://WhyChristiansBelieve.nz) - WhyChristiansBelieve.nz
- [100+ stories](https://Creation.com) – Creation.com - Subscribe to receive the free regular e-updates, or pay to receive the truly amazing quarterly magazines from Creation.com. Their articles are written by scientists who are Christians. The content is superb – and a great tool for a communicator!

Like me, you might quickly find some 'go to' stories from nature that you simply love, that you have on instant recall. I quickly think of...

- The navigational systems within the Salmon to travel and spawn exactly where they were born
- The navigational systems of the Sea Turtle – built in the cells of its head, capable of reading the magnetic field lines around Earth
- The 'dual DNA' of the butterfly – from egg to caterpillar to butterfly – and then their migratory (like the Monarch Butterfly), while also having built in navigational systems and location coding – to travel thousands of kilometres, to find specific trees to spend the winter on that they've never been to prior!
- The luminescent colours of the squid
- The 'exploding backside' of the Bombardier Beetle – with four unique chemicals in separate chambers created and then mixed in a controlled explosion
- Or from what has been discovered in the cells of our bodies – my favourite two examples are:
 - The kinesin (a two armed – two legged robot that serves as a courier, taking replacement parts around the cells of our bodies)
 - The bacterial flagellum – which is the tail motor on a bacteria with components literally no different to an outboard motor on a boat, enabling the bacterium to 'swim' around inside the cell.

A key to being intriguing is to be intrigued.
These are amazing and fun stories to tell!

4. Stories from our bicultural history

In New Zealand I've identified two key areas of our history that are very strongly Christ-influenced 1. Our bicultural history, and 2. Our values history – which is about where our cultural values came from.

- 16+ Bicultural stories: The Chronicles of Paki illustrated history story series. BigBook.nz
- 15+ Bicultural stories: Found within the 'Hope For All' booklets – very shortly written – HopeProject.co.nz/ebooks

Key names that come to mind for me (in no particular order) are Te Pahi, Patuone, Ruatara, Elizabeth Samuel Marsden, Henry Williams, Octavious Hadfield, Ngakuku and Tarore, for a couple of remarkable women in this list - Hēni te Kiri Karamu and Elizabeth Colenso, Hēnare Wiremu Taratoa, Minarapa Rangihatuaki, Katu and Te Whiwhi, Tarapiipipi Waharoa, Wiremu Kingi Te Rangatāki, Te Mani'era and Kere'opa, Te Whiti and Tohu, Piripi Taumataakura and Apirana Ngata,

5. Stories from our values history

We live in one of the most prosperous, equality-based, free and charitable societies on our planet today, and in all of history. How did we get it so good?

- 130+ Values history stories: See the 'A minute in history with the Hope Project' radio pieces – HopeProject.co.nz/a-minute-in-history
- 50+ Values history stories: Found within the 'Hope For All' booklets – very shortly written – HopeProject.co.nz/ebooks, some of these booklets cover the history of a particular value in our nation with key moments that helped to catalyse broad changes in values – including the areas of charity, end of slavery / equality of races, equality of genders, healthcare for all, education for all and more, regarding personal and political freedoms / human rights, and more.

Each story provides the a connection point suiting a public-square story or talk.

6. Stories from the Bible.

- 100+ stories

If we are alive in our intellect and emotions, it's possible to feel a sense of wonder and amazement within every story listed above.