

Listening Discerningly to Non-Churched People

Some preliminaries:

- 1) Don't overlook listening! A 2023 CID pastors survey indicated that our churches are making less effort to teach listening than some other evangelistic skills.
- 2) Unsurprisingly, *listening* goes hand in hand with *asking*. Good questions – **not**, for example, questions that can be answered in one or two words – set the stage for good listening. Also, questions are typically not as threatening as outright statements can be. (Of course, questions can be used in a pressuring or threatening way. Avoid this!) Good questions invite further conversation instead of curtailing it. Hence, the first two points of *Every One His Witness's* LASSIE – *Listen* and *Ask* – work together back and forth. Ask so you can listen. Having listened, you are positioned to ask more probing questions.
- 3) Sometimes non-churched people will ask *you* about God or Christ or faith. Especially if you do not know the person well, consider responding with a question. As Dr. Robert Kolb suggests, ask: Why do you want to know? For example, if someone says, "Do you think that people have to be baptized to be saved?" ask, "Why do you want to know?" The answer you get will help you to listen and speak still more discerningly.

Below are three encouragements, A, B, and C. Each of them stands independent of the others. Perhaps you will encounter a situation in which you can use more than one of these three suggestions. However, please bear in mind that they are not listed here with the intention that you will utilize the second one only after using the first one, etc.

A. "Active" listening

Active listening came into vogue during the late 1960s and 1970s through programs like Parent Effectiveness Training. It can still be useful. Active listening is careful listening, attentive to both verbal and non-verbal messages. It also keeps in mind what is NOT being said. Active listeners offer "feedback" to a person who speaks. Such feedback may *paraphrase* or *summarize* what was just said, or perhaps pose a question to *clarify* it.

Suppose two people, A and B, are conversing. Person A says something. Then B provides feedback to A, reflecting what A just said. That is, B "plays it back" for A.

- This gives B an opportunity to verify his or her understanding of what A said. If B's understanding seems inaccurate, A can set things straight on the spot.
- B can also actively listen to check emotions or assumptions behind A's bare words.

Active listening can be subject to parody: A says, "It's a beautiful day today!" and B follows with, "I hear you saying that it's a beautiful day." Yet even in such a mundane matter, active listening can become a gateway to further conversation. A: "It's a beautiful day today!" B (checking the underlying emotion): "So you're glad about the weather."

Active listening invites further conversation. More than that, it helps a listener gain understanding. It aims to correct misunderstandings, and it can assist you in reaching beneath the surface of conversation to more important matters.

B. Listening for hints of idolatry

For depth on this subject, a great book is Michael Lockwood, *The Unholy Trinity* (CPH, 2016). See the discussion videos at <https://www.cidlcms.org/resources-studies-unholy-trinity.html>

All sin involves idolatry, failure to fear, love, and trust in the true God. As you talk with non-churched people, try to figure out who or what they fear, love, and trust. Here are some pointers:

- People look to idols to provide them identity, security, and meaning in life.
- Idols may be persons, or perhaps inanimate objects. But idols can also include abilities such as mental or physical capacity, habits or practices such as self-expression, or “histories” such as a spotless record in one field or another.
- People find ways to serve their idols, sometimes making enormous sacrifices to do so.
- Idols eclipse other things. If I have my idol, all is well. If I lose that idol, I seriously wonder what I would do. If my idol is threatened, chaos may ensue for me and others.
- People seldom have only one idol. Deep down, they may know that all idols will ultimately fail, so they have “back-ups.”
- Idols have no grace. They show no mercy. You may give your life for a sterling reputation, but it will not give its life for you. Idols always leave you nothing.
- The worst idolatry of all is self-salvation. See Large Catechism, Ten Commandments, 22.

C. Progression of questions

Questions are of several types. Sequence questions from the simpler to the more complex. By the way, what is summarized here is detailed in the *Every One His Witness* Core Module workbook, pp. 132-137. You might want to take another look at this material. As those pages emphasize, it is impossible to provide “canned” questions to plug into every conversation. Instead, the examples below sketch three general types of questions.

a. Basic questions

These “*who-what-when*” questions help you to understand the contours of a person’s worldview. For instance:

- What led you to believe that there is no life after death?
- What are you seeking in life? What do you hope for?

b. Exploratory questions

These delve into the reasons for what a person thinks. They often start with *why*:

- What led you to believe there is no life after death?
- Why are you seeking the items you mentioned? Why are they important to you?
- A good general question of this type might be: What difference does (whatever) make?

c. Challenge questions

These questions call on others to defend their views. Often people cannot do so, yet not always. In any case, don’t pose these questions too soon. When you do ask them, do it in the friendliest way you can! A question of this sort could be structured as a “what if?”

- What if it turns out that Jesus is really risen from the dead?
- Why should you want to help others, not hurt them, if it all ends in death anyway?