

## Chapter 10

# PLANTING PART 1— THE THREE TOOLS

Life today seems to be enormously complex, either by nature or by our own design. Everyone lives with some level of distraction, and that distraction makes it difficult to get beyond the cares of *this* world long enough to consider the possibility of a world to come.

The best example of the distraction principle can be found at municipal airports. There, you may encounter a member of some Eastern religious movement who is attempting to stop hurrying passengers to discuss spiritual matters and hopefully raise a few dollars on the side. He stands at a busy intersection, a canvas bag draped from one shoulder, holding up colorful books featuring bald-headed men as he smiles and calls out to one bustling traveler after another. “Hi, where are you headed this afternoon?” “Hello there, do you have a minute to . . .” “Hi, have you ever . . .” “Excuse me, I . . .” One after another the travelers race by, carefully avoiding eye contact, and often pretending the solicitor doesn’t even exist. I’ve watched passengers walk well out of their way just to avoid a possible encounter with one of these spiritual advisers.

Can you blame the passengers? I've often joked that at the airport, even people who don't smoke start smoking. Can you imagine a more frantic, frenzied, frenetic place? Your plane was thirty minutes late. You now have only fifteen minutes to make your connection, and it's at the other end of the airport. You have two massive carry-on bags, and the shoulder strap just broke on one of them. You really ought to stop and call your wife and tell her you might be late, but is there time? Why won't the lady in front of you walk faster? Why are there so many children at the airport? Why do people *have* children, anyway?

As you reach the top of the escalator, a smiling figure steps in front of you and extends his hand. "Good morning. Where are you headed today? Have you got a minute?" Have you got a *minute*? Is he *joking*? A minute is the one thing you do *not* have. In fact, for a split second you consider grasping the hand and pulling suddenly, using the momentum to sling you past that woman who is still in front of you.

The solicitor's request seems incredibly out of place. Nowhere are people more distracted than at the airport, and yet this is the setting where the mystic hopes to engage someone in a conversation about his spiritual life. How can anyone be expected to focus on the intangible when the demands of the tangible are all around him?

This problem would be of little concern if it were confined to the airport. The problem is, the airport is a symbol of the average American's lifestyle. We are always going somewhere, always needing to make connections, and always overloaded with baggage. In today's world, the tangible distractions around us are so great that we almost never have time to contemplate the intangible. Have I got a *minute*? Are you *joking*?

Here is a list of a few of the problems an average person might deal with in a normal day. Do they sound familiar?

- I have to get the tires rotated.
- I need to look into refinancing my mortgage while the rates are good.
- I accidentally booked two lunch appointments, and I need to keep them both.
- One of the kids just called from school and said she's sick.

- I have to pick up a prescription, the dry cleaning, and some milk. I think.
- I just ran out of gas.
- I need to consider my eternal destiny.

That last item sounds incredibly out of place, doesn't it? It sounds so philosophical, so otherworldly, so *irrelevant*. Given a choice between picking up a sick daughter from school and considering the gospel, who's going to choose the latter? The problem is, *this is the average American's day*. If the gospel doesn't seem to fit in today, when does it fit?

I believe that people are essentially spiritual beings, and we are driven by spiritual needs. "We are not human beings having a spiritual experience," writes Wayne Dyer, "we are spiritual beings having a human experience."<sup>1</sup> The problem is that our human experience is so distracting that the spiritual often has to be *injected* into life, just as a badly needed vaccine must be injected into the blood system. But injections can be painful; the trick is to inject the spiritual into daily life in a way that doesn't seem annoying, abrupt, or insensitive. That's the sower's challenge. That's what it means to plant.

How does the sower accomplish this? When it comes to planting, the first issue to consider is timing. A farmer can have the hardiest seedlings in the world, but if he plants them out of season they won't survive. We can learn an important lesson about timing by remembering the airport. What does our encounter with the Eastern mystic teach us? It teaches us that people are often too busy or distracted to seriously consider spiritual things. What it does *not* teach us is that people are no longer *interested* in spiritual things. The lesson is simply that timing is one important consideration; there are good and bad moments to try to inject the spiritual into a distracted life.

A parent who wants to communicate well with a teenager must be willing to wait for *moments of openness*, undistracted moments when the teenager is willing to interact on a deeper level. These moments may be rare, and parents know that it requires patience and sensitivity to recognize them. But it's worth the wait; at those times, there is an opportunity to communicate about issues much deeper than the superficialities of daily life.

The same principle applies to anyone you meet. There are pre-

dictable “open moments” when the average person is commonly more open to consider spiritual issues:

- *Holidays*: Christmas, Easter, New Year’s Day, birthdays
- *Transitional events*: A job change, a child going to school, a child leaving home, a move, a fortieth birthday, retirement
- *Family crises*: A child’s illness, a surgery or hospitalization, a divorce or separation, a parent-child conflict, the death of a parent or friend, a financial setback
- *National events*: The space shuttle explodes, the president has an affair, the economy is uncertain, everyone is watching the news about another senseless tragedy

There are also open moments that are unique to each individual. Consider your next-door neighbor, for example. When are the best times to try to connect with him at a deeper-than-normal level? It might be when you sit together with him on his deck, or when you’re working on something together, or when you’re driving somewhere. What are *his* open moments?

To be able to recognize these open moments requires that you actually *know* something about your neighbor and that you actually have such times of interaction with him. That’s why the sower, through every daily conversation with everyone he meets, is constantly learning the best time to plant.

But once the sower has decided on the proper timing, what does he use to plant? For the farmer, planting involves placing something very small in the soil—a tiny seed or a shoot—in hopes that, with time, it will grow much larger and produce a return. The sower does the same; when the soil has been cultivated and the timing is right, he begins to implant the Word in the life of his unbelieving friend. There are three specialized tools that the sower can use to help him in this planting process: questions, agreements, and his own life.

### Tool #1: Questions

Four hundred years before the time of Christ, a stout, white-haired old man used to spend his day wandering through the marketplace of ancient Athens, striking up conversations with anyone

who would listen. His name was Socrates, and he was a big believer in the power of a good question. Socrates believed that the role of a good teacher is not simply to impart information, but to educate through the asking of skillful questions. This style of teaching has come to be known as the Socratic Method.

Strangely, Christians have a difficult time learning this method. I suspect it's because we are, by nature, answer people. Knowing that truth is on our side, we see it as our job to give answers to an ignorant world. You've got questions? We've got answers. The problem is, when we seem to have *all* the answers, we appear to be arrogant and dogmatic, and our listeners become resistant. Socrates took a different approach. Believing that truth was on his side, he saw it as his job to ask questions of a world that thought it knew everything. Though he certainly knew far more than most Athenians—and more than most of *us*—he pretended to be an ignorant man, and he chose to plant by asking questions. I believe there are four great values to this approach.

### 1. Questions Are Nonthreatening

Although people grow weary of hearing our answers, they will entertain questions all day. To put it another way: Enough of what *you* know, ask me what *I* know. Questions make the listener far more than a listener; she's now an active *participant* in the conversation. Questions have another benefit: They help to lower the listener's defenses. There is an understanding among people that a question is somehow less intentional, less *threatening* than a direct statement. After all, what's the harm in *asking*?

### 2. Questions Communicate Humility

The problem with the Christian isn't that he has answers; it's that he has *too many* answers. Christians often have deeply held convictions about capital punishment, criminal justice, welfare reform, economics, and political theory. Too often we are convinced that each opinion is *the* truly biblical position. As a result, Christians seem to have a *lot* of opinions, and we're in danger of appearing arrogant and inflexible in an age of tolerance.

At the Communication Center's summer training program, we used to teach our students to handle questions from an audience.

Some student would always ask, “What do I do if I don’t know the answer to a question?” I would say, “Try this: ‘*I don’t know.*’” I recommend this tactic not only for the sake of honesty, but because there is great benefit in admitting ignorance—at least *some* ignorance—to a fellow searcher. There’s an old saying: “It’s always popular to be searching for truth, but it’s never popular to find it.” By asking questions, the Christian shows that in *some* areas he, too, is a fellow searcher.

### 3. *Questions Allow Listeners to Discover Truth for Themselves*

In Judith Guest’s novel *Ordinary People*, a young boy is guilt-ridden over the death of his older brother. He is tortured by a sense of guilt, though he cannot understand why. He visits again and again after school with a psychiatrist, who applies the Socratic Method; he asks, he probes, but he never *tells*. At a climactic moment in the story, the young boy comes to a realization: He feels guilty because he believes that *he* should have died instead of his brother. As the boy weeps in the psychiatrist’s arms, he pleads, “Why didn’t you *tell* me?” The doctor replies, “*You* had to say it.” There is great power in the insights we come to on our own—even if we had help getting there. This may be due to the ancient dictum that says, “A person does not believe something because he thinks it is true; he thinks something is true because *he* believes it.” A good question allows a listener to provide his *own* answers instead of having to listen to yours.

### 4. *Questions Demand Questions in Return*

Conversations operate by unspoken democratic principles. Most mature listeners, after being asked several questions about themselves or their views, sense that it’s only fair to ask a question or two in return. “What about you? What do *you* think?” There’s nothing like being *asked* for your viewpoint instead of simply offering an unsolicited—and often unwelcome—opinion. But beware: The danger for the Christian is that once he is asked a question he will eagerly lecture until his listener’s eyes glaze over.

Of course, not all questions are created equal. The *value* of a question is determined by the *quality* of the question. This is where the sower needs to build skill. Because Christians tend to be answer people, we’re not especially skilled at asking *good* questions—questions that aren’t simplistic, leading, or downright insulting. Take a

look at any basic Bible study guide. Invariably, you'll find at least *some* questions of this caliber: "Read this verse: 'God so loved the world.' Question: *What* did God love?" Anyone who has been a part of a small-group Bible study knows the awkward embarrassment that occurs when a group leader actually looks at a group and asks, "What did you all get for this one?" Is he *serious*? Does he really expect us to *answer* that?

In a courtroom trial, when an attorney is questioning a witness, the opposing attorney may raise objections. He may call out, "Leading question!" or "Asked and answered!" The attorney is complaining that while his opponent has asked an *apparent* question, it isn't really a question at all. "I think Jesus is the Son of God—who do *you* think He is?" In court, a question is supposed to allow the witness the freedom to answer *as he wills*. A good question possesses three qualities: It's intelligent, it's open-ended, and it raises a point without being manipulative.

Let me suggest four categories of questions that the sower may find helpful, and some specific examples of each.

### *1. Questions About the Listener's Background*

People love to talk about themselves. So give them the chance. Ask questions about the listener's background in general, and include questions that will allow her to talk about her spiritual convictions as well.

- What was it like around your house growing up?
- What things were most important to your folks?
- Did you get in trouble a lot growing up?
- What did you get from your family that you want to pass on to your kids?
- How do you want to do things differently in your family?
- What are your brothers and sisters like? How are you alike/different?
- Did you grow up going to church? Did you enjoy it? (Or, if the person *didn't* grow up going to church: Do you wish you had?)
- Do you think you'll have your kids go to church someday?

## 2. *Questions Asking the Listener's Opinion or Advice*

I think the average listener is almost shocked to be asked for his or her opinion by someone who really wants to hear it. Endless topics and current events might encourage the listener to look at things from a spiritual perspective.

- I see you've got cable. What do you let your kids watch?
- What do you think of all the junk that's on the Internet? (I've yet to meet anyone who thinks it's *all* good.)
- Did you see *What Dreams May Come*? Incredible effects! What did you think about the way they pictured heaven?
- How do you celebrate Christmas at your house?
- What do you think about the cloning issue?
- Dr. Kevorkian is in the news again. What do you think of him?

## 3. *Questions that Involve the Listener's Imagination*

Some questions call on the listener to put himself in a certain situation and imagine what he'd do. This kind of "role-playing" can allow you to talk beyond the monotony of day-to-day events.

- Did you hear about Mary's diagnosis? What would you do if you found out *you* had cancer?
- If you had plenty of money and could do anything you want for a living, what would you do?
- What would you do if you found out *your* parents were planning to get a divorce?

## 4. *Questions that Ask for the Listener's Emotions*

On a daily basis, we rarely communicate beyond the factual level. A question that asks a listener to consider her feelings may cause her to see an issue in a completely different way.

- How do you feel about all these hate crimes?
- I have a friend whose husband has just been given three months to live. How would you feel if that were you?
- How would you feel if one of your kids really began to rebel?



- How would you feel if your house burned down and you lost everything?

I once asked a factory co-worker for his opinion about something in the Bible. I listened to his thoughts with very little comment. A week later he came back to me and said, “You know, I’ve been thinking about that question you asked me, and I think . . .” I’ve always wondered, if I had taken a different approach, if he would have come back and said, “You know, I’ve been thinking about that lecture you gave me . . .” By planting with good questions, a sower begins to encourage *two-way communication* on a spiritual level. Once that is accomplished, the harvest may be just around the corner.

## Tool #2: Agreements

An old principle of persuasion says, “The first purpose of a persuasive speech is to show that not much persuasion is needed.” In other words: A wise communicator seeks to build *agreements*, not *arguments*. *We’re not that much different, you and I. We come from similar backgrounds. We want a lot of the same things out of life. We only differ at this one point.*

Many Christians attempt to communicate with unbelievers with a mind-set more like this: *We are completely different people, you and I. We are from different worlds. I am a citizen of the kingdom of heaven; you are from the domain of darkness. We think differently, we feel differently, we value different things.*

I’ve often marveled at the apostle Paul’s approach to addressing unbelievers. In Acts 17, Paul had the opportunity to speak to a group of amateur philosophers on Mars Hill in Athens. In the days before cable, philosophy was the major sport of Athens, boasting of such past superstars as Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. It was quite a spectator sport. “All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there,” the text says, “spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas” (v. 21 NIV). When the big day finally arrived for the Paul versus Athens showdown, a large group was gathered for the opening kickoff. Athens had the home field advantage.

It’s hard to imagine two parties as different as Paul and the Athenians. Paul was Jewish; they were Greek or foreign. Paul was a

monotheist; they had statues of gods everywhere. Paul was committed to one Way, one Truth, and one Life; the Athenians constantly entertained new ideas without committing to any of them. How would *you* begin?

Paul had two choices. He could emphasize their *disagreements*—of which there were many—or he could point out their *agreements*. He wisely chose the latter. “Men of Athens,” he began. “I see that in every way you are very religious. For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you” (Acts 17:22–23 NIV). Eugene Peterson, in *The Message*, captures the tone of Paul’s words this way: “It is plain to see that you Athenians take your religion seriously. When I arrived here the other day, I was fascinated with all the shrines I came across. And then I found one inscribed, TO THE GOD NOBODY KNOWS. I’m here to introduce you to this God so you can worship intelligently, know who you’re dealing with.”

If you consider Paul’s words carefully, you’ll find that he used three different techniques to build agreement with his audience. First, he pointed out what they had in common. “Hey! We’re both into religion!” Second, he demonstrated knowledge of their world. He pointed out that he had been in town for a while and he had taken the time to view all of their “objects of worship”—notice that he used a neutral term, and he made no comment or judgment about these “objects” yet. Later on in the passage, Paul even went to the trouble of quoting some of their own Greek poets, showing that he had taken the time to understand their world before trying to change it.

Finally, Paul suggested that not much persuasion is necessary. Instead of commenting on the error of each shrine and idol, he simply pointed out one that had a blank label. All he wanted to do, he seemed to say, was fill in that one little label. What could be more painless?

Paul didn’t have to begin that way. It would have been equally *accurate* if he had chosen to stress his *disagreements* with the Athenians: “O pagan philosophers and heathen Gentiles! Never have I seen such idolatry and ignorance of the one true God. You even worship

*unknown* gods. Well, God is certainly not unknown to *me*, and I'm here to tell you all about Him." To summarize *this* approach: We are different, guess who's wrong, and you've got a lot of changing to do.

So why did Paul begin the way he did? I believe he chose to build agreements instead of arguments because his goal was not merely to *proclaim*, but to *persuade*. "And he was reasoning in the synagogue every Sabbath and trying to persuade Jews and Greeks" (Acts 18:4). Because their worlds were so different, there was very little chance that Paul could harvest that day, so he chose instead to sow. It worked. "We want to hear you again on this subject," some of them said. Eventually, "A few men became followers of Paul and believed" (Acts 17:32, 34 NIV).

The sower can apply Paul's principles today by seeking to build agreements instead of arguments with his listeners—but again, this is not easy for Christians. I said earlier that Christians, knowing that truth is on our side, tend to be *answer people*—and answer people find it hard to ask questions. In the same way, Christians have a very clear sense of exactly where we disagree with nonbelievers. As a result, we have a tendency to become *disagreement people* and to focus on the differences that exist between us instead of the common ground. Disagreement people find it difficult to find anything on which to agree. What do we really have in common?

That's the question the sower tries to answer, because the more agreement he can build with his listener, the smaller his persuasive task. As the sower encounters the friends, neighbors, and co-workers who inhabit or come across his turf each day, he can make a habit of reinforcing four messages in his listeners' minds that can greatly accelerate the harvest.

### 1. "We're Not So Different"

In Acts 22, Paul was surrounded in the temple by an angry mob. For his own protection, a group of Roman centurions arrested Paul and began to escort him to safety. But Paul asked permission of the commander to stop and address the crowd. Though Paul spoke to the Roman commander in Greek, he addressed the crowd in their *own* language—in Hebrew. "I am a Jew," he began, "born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city. Under Gamaliel I was thoroughly trained in the law of our fathers and was just as zealous for God as

any of you are today” (Acts 22:3 NIV). As he spoke, we are told, the angry mob grew *quiet*. I believe the calming effect was the result of Paul’s words: *I am one of you. We speak the same language. I grew up in this city. I went to school here. I was brought up like you, and I have many of the same values as you. We’re not so different.* You can almost imagine the thoughts of the crowd: *Hey, he’s one of us. How bad can he be?*

The sower can build agreement with his listener—and perhaps produce the same calming effect—by pointing out their common backgrounds. *I’m from the Midwest, too. Hey, that’s where I went to college. I have three kids, too. Sure I like football. You know—we’re not so different.* The nonbeliever needs to know that, though we believe in heaven and hell and God and angels and demons, we’re not actually *from Mars*. He needs to know that our worlds overlap in some way and that we can still understand the world in which *he* lives and breathes.

## 2. “We Have Similar Values”

Every Christian knows that, in some ways, our standards are very different from the rest of the world. But Christians often fail to recognize that our standards and values are very similar in other ways—ways that can be pointed out to the listener. I’ve found that almost all parents, for example, desire to impart similar values to their children. I’ve never met a parent who hopes to raise *dishonest* and *disobedient* kids. We may disagree on what obedience *looks* like, or how it is to be *instilled*—but the sower shouldn’t overlook the fact that a common value may underlie our methodological differences. *We’re trying to teach our kids to be responsible, too. How do you do it at your house?*

## 3. “We Have the Same Concerns and Interests”

C. S. Lewis once wrote, “The man who agrees with us that some important question, little regarded by others, is of great importance can be our Friend. He need not agree with us about the answer.”<sup>2</sup> We disagree with non-Christians about all sorts of answers—but can we show them that we at least have a common concern about the questions? The statement, “I think the president’s behavior was disgraceful” will draw a very different response than “I think the president should have been impeached.” The opinion, “I

think there's too much garbage on television" will draw almost universal agreement. The solution, "I think we need more censorship" will get much more varied responses.

I'm not suggesting that Christians revise all of their opinions to win the approval of non-Christian acquaintances. I'm simply saying that, though we commonly disagree with others on the specific solutions to problems, we shouldn't overlook the fact that we agree about the problems themselves. According to Lewis, that agreement alone may be enough to form a friendship. Agreements can be built when our listeners realize that we hold the same *concerns*. The discussion of *solutions* can be saved until the fruit has had a chance to ripen more.

#### 4. "*We Have the Same Needs*"

Would you like to receive a hefty Christmas bonus this year? So would everyone else. Would you like to shed a few pounds and get back in shape? So would just about everyone else. In fact, many of your goals are so basic that they're shared by almost *all* people at your stage of life. Have you ever met a person who hopes to get sick, lose his house, and skip his vacation this year?

The man who walks up to a neighbor wearing his "To live is Christ" T-shirt may get a puzzled look; to the neighbor, to *live* is to eat, sleep, work, and play. The non-Christian suspects that belief in Christ is a call to abandon the material world and to think only of mystical, spiritual things. Far from it; the Christian faith is a call to *embrace* the world around us and to see all of life through a biblical worldview. The unbeliever's first chance to understand this is when we show her that we want many of the same things she does—but we may go about them in a very different way and for different reasons.

### Tool #3: Your Life

As I said earlier, I've often marveled at the apostle Paul's approach to dealing with unbelievers. Acts 17 was one such example; in the book of 1 Thessalonians we see another. Paul had visited the Macedonian capital and had worked amidst great opposition to evangelize and found a church. Paul was finally forced to flee the city, but he was so concerned about the fate of the fledgling church

he left behind that he sent Timothy back to strengthen and reassure them. Timothy brought back an encouraging report, which prompted Paul to write his first letter to the Thessalonians.

In that letter, Paul said something about his style of ministry to the Thessalonians. “As apostles of Christ we could have been a burden to you,” he reminded them, “but we were gentle among you, like a mother caring for her little children. We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well, because you had become so dear to us” (1 Thessalonians 2:6b–8 NIV).

Paul tells us that he planted far more than doctrinal truth in his listeners’ lives; *he imparted his own life as well*. Thessalonica was a rough town for Christians, where opponents to the faith formed angry mobs and believers were dragged before city authorities. Paul knew that in that kind of environment, it would never be enough to simply ask good questions or build common ground. He had to get personally involved; his love, concern, and assurance of ongoing support would make all the difference for a Thessalonian counting the cost of belief in Christ.

In our country today no cities are quite as hostile to the faith as Thessalonica. Instead, in pockets *within* our cities—pockets sometimes as small as a family or marriage—faith in Christ is still met with Thessalonian rage. Paul’s principle still applies; if we are hoping that people within these pockets will respond to Christ, we will need to plant our own lives as well.

I said earlier that the cost of faith in Christ is not the same for everyone, and that the sower must try to understand how much he is asking of his listener. It’s one thing to be asked to jump from a burning building; it’s another thing to be asked to jump when someone is offering to hold a safety net below. Both steps require courage, but not equal amounts of courage. Sometimes the unbeliever has a very clear concept of what he would leave behind by accepting Christ, but little idea of what awaits him when he jumps. “Are there people like *me* there? Is there anything to *do*? Does anybody have *fun*? I’m thinking of jumping—is anybody holding the net?”

The sower needs to be willing to say, “*I will hold the net.*” Many writers have observed that one of the most important elements for an unbeliever considering conversion is his perceived

sense of Christian community—or lack thereof. In other words, “I know the community I would leave behind; is any community waiting for me on the other side?” People in general have a powerful desire to *belong* and to be *accepted*, and these desires are not eliminated by faith in Christ. An unbeliever considering the gospel is not only asking, “Can I believe this?” but also, “Who would I *know* there? Would I *belong*?”

The sower’s effort to plant not only with good questions and agreements but her own life as well may make all the difference in the future harvest. Three principles can help the sower impart her life in a genuine and effective way.

### *1. Be There for the Other Person’s Agenda, Not Yours*

In the second chapter of Job, Job’s three friends made the decision to visit their grieving friend to “sympathize with him and comfort him. . . . Then they sat down on the ground with him for seven days and seven nights with no one speaking a word to him, for they saw that his pain was very great” (Job 2:11, 13). Originally, Job’s counselors weren’t counselors at all; they set off to see their friend with no agenda other than to be with him. The remarkable thing is that they considered this a worthwhile activity.

We live in a cynical age. When a stranger is unexpectedly friendly, the first thought that comes to mind is, *What does he want? Is he selling something, or does he want to sign me up for his multi-level marketing scheme?* In the busyness of modern life, we often seek out others only when we *want* something from them. Unfortunately, Christians are sometimes guilty of the same fault. What comes to our neighbor’s mind when our *first sign* of friendliness is followed by an evangelistic presentation?

Christians are quick to say, “But I don’t want anything *from* my neighbor. I have something *for* my neighbor—the gift of salvation.” But does that ring any truer to the neighbor than when a salesman comes to his front door and begins, “Now, I’m not here to *sell* you anything”? Of course he is there to sell something, and of course the Christian wants something from his neighbor: his time, his attention, and, hopefully, his commitment.

A wise sower begins to sow his life in the lives of those around him long before he wants anything in return. Like Job’s friends, the

sower understands that there is a time just to “sympathize and comfort,” asking nothing in return. Our willingness to serve our neighbor’s agenda now might determine whether he is ever willing to consider ours later.

## 2. *Take Him, Don’t Send Him*

Why say to a neighbor, “You really ought to go to church,” when you can say, “Why don’t you come to church with me?” Why say, “That’s a movie you really ought to see,” when you can say, “I’m going to rent that video Friday night. Why don’t you come over?” The obvious reason we often say the former instead of the latter is that it takes much less time to *send* someone than to *take* him yourself. But advice is cheap. I’m willing to recommend any number of things that cost me nothing and bring me no risk of failure. “Have you invested in this mutual fund? *You* really should.”

In a busy world, the extent to which we’re willing to invest our own life tells a person a lot about how much we really care—and a lot about the reality of the gospel. Paul thought it wise to invest in the Thessalonians in this way; his relationship with them may have been the critical support that helped them to continue to believe in the midst of a hostile environment.

## 3. *Be There After the Deal Is Signed*

A current series of radio commercials for an automobile insurance company stresses the importance of having a *local* company. *Sure*, they say, *anybody* can sell you an insurance policy; but what happens when you have a question? How fast will they get there if you have an accident? *Where will they be when you need them?* That question is an important one for every harvester. Sometimes, in our desire to see people come to Christ, we see the moment of conversion as a kind of finish line, like graduation from college. Instead, we need to see conversion as it is biblically described—as a kind of birth. A new life has begun, but it’s a very fragile and dependent life that needs our ongoing love and care—and the broader love and care of a church family. The sower needs to make it clear by word *and* deed that her relationship with the listener is not a security blanket that will be pulled away once the baby is born.

Harvesters may argue that this principle of “planting your own



life” simply takes us back to the old question of friendship evangelism. “Is it really necessary to build a relationship with everyone you meet before you can say anything about the gospel?” No, but the concept of sowing recognizes that there are different kinds of fruit and that fields ripen at an uneven rate. Some personalities are more individualistic and are much less concerned about community. But others care very much, and a developing relationship with that kind of person can make all the difference. The sower must determine the type of fruit before he decides the method of harvest. One thing he knows for certain—one technique does not fit all.

Every day, with everyone he meets, the sower attempts to cultivate the soil and plant the seed. The three planting tools we’ve looked at in this chapter—questions, agreements, and your own life—all involve the sower himself. But there is something else the sower can use to plant, something external to himself: He can expose the unbeliever to a wide variety of books, tapes, movies, and other materials that help the sower to easily and naturally interact with the unbeliever about spiritual topics. But as we’ll see in the next chapter, not just any materials will do.

*Finding Common Ground*

by

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