

## The Interest of an Unbeliever

This past week a few words by author Georges Bernanos caught my attention. A Christian himself, Bernanos, who was writing from the perspective of an unbeliever, wrote this: *“Unbelievers are extremely interested in you [Christians]. There are few of us who at some point in our lives have not made a tentative approach in your direction, were it only to insult you. After all, put yourselves in our place. Were there but one chance, even the smallest chance, the faintest chance, of you being right, death would come as a devastating surprise to us. So we’re bound to watch you closely and try to fathom you.”* This is a rather surprising and somewhat refreshing perspective.

Usually we are encourage to gauge our feelings and attitudes toward those who don’t believe, and it is right that we do so. We are called to love them and express that love by bringing them word of God’s grace. We are encouraged to show interest in those who don’t believe, but we struggle with that, often times, feeling guilty that we have not done enough to bring the gospel to those who are around us. We castigate ourselves for not having done enough “to win souls for Christ,” to use a Baptist expression.

Perhaps one of the biggest challenges to our work of evangelism is that we have come to believe that unbelievers don’t care to hear the gospel. Who would be interested in what we have to say anyway? We are told repeatedly that the gospel is no longer relevant for today’s world, and we might wonder if it is true. Who wants to listen to something that doesn’t matter? Further, as Reformed Christians, we are firmly convinced that the Holy Spirit must first work in the hearts of unbelievers before they would believe, and we make the excuse, perhaps, that we don’t always know where the Spirit is at work, if he is indeed at work in this part of the world. Perhaps we convince ourselves that no one really wants to hear the message we have for them because the Holy Spirit doesn’t seem to be preparing receptive hearts.

Bernanos wants us to look at things from a different perspective. How do unbelievers see us? Again, we often chastise ourselves by saying that unbelievers see our problems, our divisions, our sins, and they draw the conclusion that they we are all hypocrites. That sentiment is out there, without a doubt, but unbelievers must really wonder why we do what we do? What motivates the faithful, each and every Sunday, some of them twice, to attend a worship service? Why do they do that? And they must wonder when we face illness and death and struggle with confidence and peace how it can be that we can be so assured in the face of difficulty. Many of them do not have much reason to hope. As Bernanos says, many unbelievers must have moments when they wonder about what happens after death, and they must have that twinge of fear that perhaps they are wrong in their belief, and if they are wrong, what awaits them is an eternity of despair.

It may well be a fact that there is more interest in what gives us hope and peace than what we might believe. Unbelievers may not be as hardened as we imagine. In fact, they may be more receptive to the gospel than we might have led ourselves to believe. We won’t know, of course, until we engage in conversations with those around us who do not believe. It is only then that we can discover if unbelievers are interested in what compels us to do what we do.

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Over the years I have had opportunity to engage unbelievers in conversations, and, surprisingly, those conversations are usually started by them. Perhaps it's because they discovered I am a pastor or because I mentioned church on Sunday, or perhaps it is something else that I said or did. I don't recall how the conversations started, but, usually, there is a genuine interest in what we believe. True, sometimes people want to point out the faults of the church and have questions about the fact that we see so divided. I've only had one person ridicule Christianity, but I got to know him fairly well, and he tends to the kind of person to repeat what he has heard others say. Except in rare cases, I have discovered that there is a genuine interest in what being a Christian is all about, even if that interest is coloured with skepticism or disdain. But interest is interest, and we should make the most of every opportunity to talk about what God has done in Christ.

I must confess that talking about my faith with unbelievers is not always the easiest thing for me. I must also admit that the more I do it, the more natural it becomes. In other words, practice helps, something that I am discovering far too late in life.

I find the view of Bernanos fascinating, for I had never thought of things in that way. Perhaps we might find talking about our faith with others to be a lot easier if we understand that they are interested, even if it is only out of curiosity. As Reformed Christians, we don't know where the Holy Spirit is working, but instead of assuming that he is not (an excuse to remain silent), we should assume that he is working in the hearts of unbelievers, and they might be genuinely searching instead of being merely curious. As Peter says, we should always be prepared to answer those who wonder why we have so much hope. I don't doubt that unbelievers are interested in what makes a Christian tick. Sometimes that interest is rooted in disdain, but interest is interest, and we may have more opportunities to talk about what Jesus has done than we have traditionally believed.

*Pastor Gary*