

00:00:22 I had lunch with a pastor a while ago, and I asked him a question that apologists have been asking all the time, for years and years now. But I think they've been missing a step. The question was, "What would it take for you to invite me to come share your church?" He gave an answer that I think is going to astound apologists, leaving pastors shaking their heads, going, "How could they have missed it?"

Hi, I'm Tom Gilson. This is the thinking Christian podcast season 2 episode 8. Last week in episode 7, I was talking about how drastically the world has changed. The pastor's job isn't what it used to be here in the Western world. If he wants to do any evangelism at all, any evangelism at all, which I would say includes reaching the children, growing up in his own church, he's going to have to do it cross culturally.

00:01:17 It's a missionary challenge. Now talk about a tough road; and frankly, the issues are more complex than any we've ever seen in this part of the world, too. I'm not saying this is the hardest time our world has ever experienced, or even our nation (speaking of America in particular), but arguably this is the toughest the *church* in the Western world has ever faced. And the issues are certainly the most complicated.

Well, I've learned a few things in my 40-plus years of Christian ministry, and I'm going to talk about three of them here. Three things I've learned in 40 years of ministry. And more that I think could be the key for you in navigating this world as a pastor. It could be key to any Christian layman in going to work on a school, whatever, and your family, whatever.

And it actually aims toward the answer that pastor gave me at lunch that day a couple of years ago, but I'm going to save that answer till the end.

What I've Learned, Number One:

If It's Hard and You've Never Done It Before, Don't Go It Alone

00:02:18 So, three things that I've learned: The first one is if you are doing a very hard thing you've never done before, you don't want to do it on your own. If it's really hard and you've never done it before, don't do it on your own. Because it's *hard*. And because you have no experience. That's when you want to call in help.

My top example for that is a painful one. I mean, really painful. It was when the youth pastor in our church, a man that I loved, a man that my son, a teenager, looked up to very much. My daughter was just entering into the youth group. She really respected him. This man was arrested for felony sexual misbehavior with minors.

00:03:09 It was awful. We'd never been through anything like that as a church before. You probably haven't either. I hope not. I really hope not. If it happens to you, take this lesson well. We didn't know what we were doing, but by God's grace, we were able to bring in a very wise and seasoned crisis manager, a man of great experience in Christian ministry, too, a crisis manager to help us through.

And man, the help he gave us was just incredible. I won't go into it. I'm just going to tell you, I'm not sure we could have made it without him. We engaged counselors to help too. In other words, we got help, because it was more than we knew how to handle on our own. And we made it through. Yes, there was damage. There has to be, when a man does what he did, there was damage. There's no denying that it was real, but the church maintained its witness in the community.

Speaker 1 00:04:04 We lost some people. We had budget trouble for awhile, but in the end under good leadership, and with the right help, we were able to maintain our witness. And we came through, and the church is strong. Now I'm not going to that church now because I don't live in that community. I don't live in that state anymore. But I would be going to that church if I still lived there.

What I've Learned, Number One (Second Part): For Cross-Cultural Ministry in the Western World, the Best Help May Come From an Apologist.

This was tough. We didn't expect to be good at doing something we'd never done before. We found helpers who were good at it. That's lesson number one, find good help. And here's where apologetics come in. Pastor, if this is truly a cross-cultural world, if this is truly a cross cultural situation in which you're ministering, and especially in which you're doing evangelism, then you want someone alongside you who understands the cross-cultural issues.

00:05:09 And there's no one better at it than someone who specializes in worldview; and 99% of the time, you know who that's going to be: It's going to be an apologist, either a full-time apologist or someone who's in your church, and who's just really deep into study because he or she really loves apologetics. Your best help in understanding the cross-cultural issues and real views today is going to be someone who devotes a lot of time and a lot of effort to studying and learning Christian apologetics.

That's the first thing I learned. If you're undertaking something very new and very difficult wisdom says you don't want to do it on your own. You probably want to partner with a Christian apologist.

What I've Learned, Number Two (First Par): Apologists Don't Understand the Reason Pastors Don't Invite Them In More Freely

And for a lot of pastors, I know that's exactly the last thing you wanted to hear. There's good reason for it. You've had bad experiences or maybe you just a bad impression. I don't know what it is. There's at least reason for it.

00:06:06 But if you ask the apologists, "Why aren't pastors, Why aren't churches more interested in apologetics?" they're probably not going to give you the answer that comes first to your mind. Apologists are good at reasons. Most of the time, that's what we're supposed to be good at, but we haven't been so good at it this time. When it comes to understanding why apologetics doesn't get more of a hearing in churches, we've missed the boat badly.

I'm going to answer this in the end, and pastors, you're going to say, "Well, yeah, duh, what's wrong with you apologists? Why didn't you see this?" I'm hoping we can pull some of this together, so that we can bridge that difference by the time we're done here.

But in order to get there — that's in the third point — I need to get to the second major point, first. And I've got to lead up to this one sideways, by looking at it from the apologists perspective and showing exactly how we have gotten it wrong. We've missed this second major point, and I'm going to show how. And as I do that, you'll start to realize what that major point of learning is.

What I've Learned, Number Two (Second Part): Apologists' Explanations for it Miss the Boat

00:07:13 You know, apologists do see a problem; that is, the churches need to understand more than the churches do. Church members need to know more and pastors and ministries need to have better knowledge of what's going on in the world, so that we can be stronger in our faith, stronger and our evangelism stronger in our commitment. So we know that there's something that's not quite there yet. It could be better than this.

We also know that we have something to offer the church because we can give reasons for faith. And it bothers us that the church isn't listening. (Take special note of that line, "the church isn't listening," because in a few minutes, I'll show you how backwards it is.)

Well, anyway, it bothers us. So we try to figure it out. We try to figure out why won't the church listen to us. And we come up with reasons like the church doesn't understand discipleship, right?

00:08:08 The Bible says discipleship includes the whole person, and that's got to

include the mind. And the church is just falling short on discipleship of the mind. So the church is wrong for starters.

How's it feel to hear that, pastor? I know, it's kind of judgmental, isn't it? Not that it's entirely wrong, by the way. But most apologists will see that as kind of problem number one, why we're not having an impact in the church. Or maybe shared with this is also problem Number two, that, yeah, we've got our own share of the problem that we contribute. We tend to be geeky. We're a little bit weird and maybe even combative. That's no help at all. It's not very attractive in the church. Not very attractive to a pastor.

00:08:52 But I want to come back to that charge that gets laid at the feet of the church, the one that says in essence, that most Christians have a wrong view on discipleship or wrong view on the life of the mind. And I want you to notice just how beautifully that fits into the apologetics stereotype, which is, "You've got a problem. And it's the way you're thinking. It's the way you're thinking. And if we could just persuade you to think differently, your problem would be solved. You need reasons, and you need to be persuaded by these reasons.

Apologists. We have a hammer, we have a hammer, and so we see everything as a nail. That is, we're really good at intellectual reasoning. And we know we hope to be good at persuasion. So we see every problem as one that can be solved through reasoning and persuasion. That's the wrong answer. At least it's way short of being the whole right answer.

What I've Learned Number Two (The Main Lesson): Apologists Won't Get Anywhere Until They Properly *Earn Trust* from Pastors

00:09:53 The second thing that I've learned, it's astonishingly simple, really. I can't imagine how so many apologists have failed to see it. When we talk about why we're not having an impact in the church, this one hardly, I don't know if it ever comes up. Yeah. I can think of some examples, Brett. Kunkle I'm going to mention his name. He told a story about his own relationship with his own church and it showed that he got it perfectly. Lee Strobel, Mark Mittelberg, they cut their teeth on ministry and churches.

I could name others, but that doesn't come up at all when we have these conversations on why the church won't listen. So here's the second major lesson I've learned in 40 plus years of ministry. Here it is astonishingly simple. No pastor is going to listen to anyone he doesn't trust. I mean, it's just that you, you, it's got to have trust.

00:10:50 It's crucial. It's non-negotiable; it's of the essence of ministry. Ministry never happens any other way, and why should it, why should anyone expect it to be different than that?

And here now I was slow moving into my second major lesson, but I'm going to go straight into the third one. Just one quick side note first. I've never worked in the for-profit world and I've never worked in government or academia. I suspect this third lesson applies there, but I also suspect it's more true on the whole in ministry than it is anywhere else.

What I've Learned, Number Three: Three Secret Key Words to Building Trust: Relationship, Relationship, and Relationship

And so here it is, this is the one that I think applies, especially to ministry, just two words for apologists. Do you want to have a ministry in a church? Build relationships? That's how you're going to have impact. That's how you're going to get church leaders to trust you. Build relationships.

00:11:50 That's what it takes. Not persuasion, not persuading them they need you, but building relationships. And this is where that lunch I was talking about at the beginning comes in the lunch with the local pastor. One of my favorite pastimes. actually is taking pastors to lunch. COVID really messed with that, but I've found ways to connect as best I could anyway. And, and this time this was actually before COVID.

I was sitting down with a pastor, Steve, and he and I were eating chowing down on our chips and salsa. And I started in with him the same way. I almost always do. I said, "Hey, Steve, tell me your story." And you know, I could ask the question lots of different ways, but the point of it really is just that I want to listen. I want to hear from him. I'm interested in him. I genuinely am.

00:12:38 By the way: Apologists, I said earlier, complain that churches won't listen to them. I've gotten *so far by listening to pastors*, listening to what they have to say about their churches.

Well, Steve asked for my story in return and I told them about my work in apologetics and in my interest in connecting better with churches. And so it was that at the end, when all the plates were cleared, we were just finishing up, I was able to bring up a very important question. "So tell me, pastor, what does it take for a person like me to get an invitation, to share in a church like yours?"

And I loved his answer. Loved his answer. He smiled. And he simply said, "This." He saw my questioning look. And so he explained: "Lunch together. Relationship."

In other words, relationship, relationship, relationship.

00:13:35 I had lunch with another local pastor, and then a while later we did it again. And a little while later, he invited me to lead a webinar on critical race theory with all the local pastors in his denomination. He

wouldn't have done that if I'd sent him a flyer, not even a perfectly crafted, massively persuasive flyer. He did it because we'd begun building trust through relationship.

I met another pastor at a local meeting. I don't even remember where it was now. We had lunch, my wife and I attended a series of lessons, he was conducting at his church and now he's asked me to help plan and then speak at an apologetics conference at his church this coming fall. We're bringing along another friend of mine, who I introduced to him, who's also a gifted apologist relationship relationship.

00:14:30 A couple of years ago, I tried running an initiative for a large apologetics interest group on Facebook. I called it "Take your pastor to lunch month." I was hoping to just kind of induce or guide or persuade other people in apologetics to start building that relationship with their pastor, because it's so it's, it's obvious to a lot of people. Apologists, we need to learn just how important it is in ministry.

What I've Learned, Number Three: Two More Key Words to Building Trust: Demonstrated Competence and Demonstrated Relevance

Now, obviously relationship isn't the whole story for building trust. If you want a pastor to trust your competence, you'd better be able to demonstrate some competence. If you want them to believe that your competence matters, too, as minister, you'd better be able to explain exactly how and why it matters. If you want him to believe you're someone who can help others follow Christ better, you'd better be following Christ yourself. All of that is essential, but it's also the nail that apologists like to hammer on most, meanwhile missing the one thing pastors want and need most: Relationship.

00:15:39 The ideal relationship is one to one. I've spent hours and hours with another pastor in town, in fact, we've become best friends. He's also invited me to speak at his church several times. Funny how it works that way. So, one-to-one in-person is of course the best case scenario. And without a doubt, it's my favorite way to build relationships.

And if I weren't doing that, I doubt anything else I tried would work. It wouldn't be authentic, that's for sure, if I said I cared for churches like I said I did; that church matters to me, or pastors matter to me, and I didn't live it. It wouldn't be real. It wouldn't in and pastors who would figure that out.

But I do want to say that one-to-one, in person, isn't the only way to open up a trust relationship. It can happen through referrals. You know, Pastor Smith is friends with Pastor Williams who knows me and gives me a good recommendation.

00:16:34 In this case, the two pastors' relationship with each other builds a bridge to create one between Pastor Smith and me. It can happen also through what I'll call observation, where Pastor Jones sees the work I do, the way I speak and so on, and over time, from a distance, realizes I'm a person he can trust. That's one big reason, obviously, that authors get invited to speak at churches. The pastor reads the book, and when he's reading, he's not just assessing the quality of the information. He's thinking about the character quality of the writer too.

What I've Learned, Number Three: Putting It In Practice Right Here, With This Podcast and My Latest Book, on Jesus.

And I might as well be honest here; if I'm hoping people will trust me, I might as well be honest. That process is exactly what I'm hoping will happen through this blog and podcast. I have information to share, but I'm counting on it over time building trust. That is, that pastors will begin to get a sense of who I am and not just what I say, because I want to share in churches.

00:17:33 I really do want to help pastors and lay people really understand the world in which we live so that we can have more confidence in Christ, more confidence in facing the world in which we live and better evangelism. So by the way, I hope you'll check up on me, too, if I can call it that this time, by downloading the free chapter that I'm offering from my book [*Too Good to be False: How Jesus' Incomparable Character Reveals His Humanity*](#).

You can do it by looking for the offer on any page in my [Thinking Christian blog](#) and website at thinkingchristian.net. The chapter is titled "Jesus' Astonishing Love." And what you'll find in there is a view on Jesus that reveals the depth of his love to a degree many of us have never seen before. I never had in 40 some years before I did the study for this book.

00:18:30 Lee Strobel read it And he called it "engaging... exhilarating." He said, "This might be the most surprising and refreshing book you'll read this year."

Biola University, professor Sean McDowell said, "With so many books on Jesus, how do you say something fresh? My friend Tom Gilson has figured it out."

I'm offering you that free chapter so you can get a taste of the book. And although I didn't write it for this purpose, you might in the process learn a little bit more about who I am, that my interest in church ministry and evangelism in confidence and faith and so on, all flows out of nothing more than my total love and total commitment to our astonishing Savior Jesus Christ.

Oh, by the way, what you've just heard? I was demonstrating what I was talking

about. As far as you can't always do relationships face to face. Sometimes you need to build relationship and trust from a distance.

What I've Learned, Number Three: Pastor, I'd Love to Buy You Lunch!

But at the same time, if you are a pastor living anywhere near the Dayton or Cincinnati, Ohio area, I'd love to take you out to lunch.

00:19:46 I'll buy. It is absolutely one of my favorite ways to spend my time. And if it doesn't give me an invitation to come speak at your church, it's still one of my favorite ways to spend my time. I wanted to share that with you at the beginning or near the beginning of this new stage in my podcast, in this second season, in which I am really turning my focus towards how can I help pastors help their churches in this time of incredible cross-cultural change in the world in which we live. That's what I want to do for you.

I've got a list of items, topics on which I hope to provide explainers.

Some of this actually might show up on *The Stream* (stream.org), where I also write. We're working on a way to make it work together; which I'm really looking forward to that, if we can make it happen the way I think it's going to look. But I wanted to share with you near the beginning of this podcast season.

What I've Learned, Number Three: This Isn't Just Theory; It's for Practical Ministry

00:20:49 Now this podcast season that this is not just about explainers. This is not just about dumping information. This is about connecting as people in ministry together as brothers and sisters in Christ, so that we can have a more effective, more living, more real, more world changing impact starting within our churches, starting within families even, but going beyond that to the entire world in which we live and to which God has called us to go and share the good news of Jesus Christ.

That's what I want to be a part of; that's what I want to help you with, because pastor, you are the key person, those of us in apologetics, we're specialists in one area, but you're the one who does the leadership that makes the most difference. And I know that for sure. And I want to support you in it.

00:21:47 Again, the web address to get the free download chapter from *Too Good to be False*, the [web address is thinkingchristian.net. I hope you'll go there and subscribe, get a taste of the book, get a new view on Jesus.

And that's it for now. Next week, God willing — and it kind of depends on how things work together with *The Stream* — but I think next week I'll launch into these explainers where we talk about the issue and how it relates to a biblical

worldview, and how that information connects to practical ministry, s.o you know what to do as a pastor, as a leader, as an elder, as a teacher, even as a parent, even as a lay person; so that you know what to do with the information learning and understanding, but always with an intensely practical ministry application.

That's what I'm here for. That's how I want to serve you. If you have anything you want to say in response about whether I'm hitting the mark, missing the mark, whatever, leave a comment.

And while you're doing that, if you're on your podcast host, please subscribe, please leave a positive rating. It will help get the word to others to whom I would love to offer the same service.

Until next week, then this is Tom Gilson for the Thinking Christian podcast. Thank you for listening.

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