

CHAPTER 1

Creating God Space

Paul and Lisa, a young married couple, were heading home to celebrate the holiday season with Lisa's side of the family. Three years earlier, after a rocky first year of marriage, Paul and Lisa had realized they needed something greater than themselves to make their marriage work. They discovered an older married couple who helped them realize that if Jesus were in control of their lives, he could help the two of them become one.

As they grew in their newfound faith, they began to realize that no one else in their entire family believed in Jesus the way they did. Nevertheless, neither Paul nor Lisa felt confident or competent enough to talk about the faith that had turned their lives and marriage around. They had the desire, and they even saw the need, but they didn't know how to bring up their faith in a natural way, so they didn't. However, they were determined to change all that, this Christmas. As they neared their destination, Paul and Lisa's sense of inadequacy and fear of failure drove them into a time of prayer.

If you'd been sitting in the back seat of their car that day, and Paul and Lisa had turned around after their prayer time and asked you for advice on how to bring up the topic of faith, what would you have told them? How do you start a spiritual conversation with family, friends, or co-workers without turning them off?

Keep thinking about this question, for it's a very important one. But for now, let's dive back into our story to find out what Paul and Lisa did.

On Christmas Day, after all the gifts were opened, Paul and Lisa were casually sitting around, catching up with Lisa's younger sister, Karen. Paul and Lisa had heard that Karen was into some kind of New Age religion she had

discovered through friends in college. When Paul and Lisa asked her how things were going, Karen excitedly told them that she was on a spiritual high due to an angel that had recently appeared to her in a dream.

This was the opportunity Paul and Lisa had been looking and praying for. Before Karen even had a chance to share what the angel had told her, Lisa hijacked the conversation. She passionately informed her sister that Scripture says the devil masquerades as the angel of light—that she didn't know what she was messing around with.

Once Lisa had finished her sermonette, she tagged out, and Paul tagged in. He made sure Karen understood that her New Age religion was akin to witchcraft. Paul felt a surge of confidence and power as he pronounced other truths he was convinced Karen needed to hear.

After Paul and Lisa finished double-teaming Karen, the room was filled with an awkward silence. The conversation was over before it ever began. Karen got up and left the room. Paul and Lisa had wounded her so deeply that Karen refused to speak to them the rest of the holiday season. What's more, when Karen told the rest of the family how she had been disrespected, parented, judged, and essentially labeled as a witch, a family verdict was quickly reached. Paul and Lisa were now sentenced to wear the scarlet F (reserved for religious Fanatics) in the family.

Paul and Lisa drove home defeated and discouraged. The very thing they had feared the most had happened. This experience made it easy for them to become a part of the silent majority who keep their faith to themselves.

Karen and the rest of Lisa's family, on the other hand, came to an entirely different conclusion. They decided that the only way to have a safe conversation with a Christian is to make sure you say things you know they'll agree with—otherwise you'll be told why you're wrong and they're right. Rather than risk another awkward outcome, the whole family agreed not to talk about religion around Paul and Lisa again. Paul and Lisa's good intentions produced nothing more than hurt feelings, and a resolve on both sides to leave spiritual conversations alone.

A SAFE PLACE

I often wonder what would happen if—instead of all-too-common occurrences like the one above—the body of Christ could create low-risk, high-grace places for people to pursue their need to have spiritual

conversations. According to Ecclesiastes 3:11, God has given us all an inner drive to know and be known by him. St. Augustine so brilliantly captured this thought when he wrote in his *Confessions*, “Our heart is not quiet until it rests in Thee.” Where does an unquiet heart like Karen’s go these days to safely share this yearning to know and be known by the Creator?

For most Christians, the answer is a no-brainer: It’s the local church, of course! Unfortunately, this is not the word on the street. For many who grew up outside the walls of the church, going to church is a scary proposition.

I was reminded of this recently. I met the owner of a Japanese steakhouse in Fort Collins, Colorado, through a mutual friend. He came over to my friend’s house to play pingpong. We were having such a good time that when he asked me what I did for a living, I did something I rarely do with a stranger: I invited him to come to church with me the next morning. I explained that I had been invited to Fort Collins to preach at a church, and if he wanted to experience firsthand what I do for a living, he was welcome to come join me. In strongly accented English, he quickly replied, “Oh, no, Mr. Doug, I too full of sin.” My heart broke to hear him so eloquently express in broken English what millions have made abundantly clear. The church has become a scary place for people who are “too full of sin.”

RAISING THE BAR—BY LOWERING IT

For many, going to church is as scary as going to a hard-core biker bar might be to Christians. This point became crystal clear to me in Idaho several years ago.

I was invited to do a workshop in a small town north of Boise by several local churches that were trying to figure out how to effectively reach their community. After a couple of hours of teaching on Friday night, I challenged everyone in the audience to head down to the local bar with my wife and me to apply what we’d just learned.

I was shocked by the response. Only one hand was raised. The pastor responsible for arranging my visit knew I wasn’t going to let *him* off the hook, so it was no surprise to see *his* hand. As I probed to understand why these good-hearted people had unanimously declined my offer, they described the bar as a place for carousing, dirty jokes, swearing, drunkenness, smoking... the list went on until the “filthy five,” “nasty nine,” and “dirty dozen” had all been covered.

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After they finished sharing, I said, “It sounds like you’re describing a bar to me. You didn’t expect them to be singing ‘Amazing Grace’ and baptizing people with Bud Light down there, did you? Did Jesus call us to fish from the bank, or to swim with the fish, when he told us to go into all the world?”

My next question set them up: “How many of you would like to see the people at the bar come to church on Sunday morning?” All hands were raised.

I then asked, point-blank, “Who do you think is going to make the first move? If I go down to the bar and make the same invitation to them that I made to you, how many bar hoppers do you think would be willing to leave *their* ‘club’ to join *your* ‘club’ on Sunday morning? What would compel someone to give up what he likes to do most on Sunday morning, borrow a suit and tie, sing songs to somebody he can’t see, listen to someone speak at him for 30 to 45 minutes about someone who lived more than 2,000 years ago, and then pay for the experience with something called an offering? How many takers do you think I’d have?”

I thought my stirring speech would surely move a few people to *be* the church down at the local bar that night, but no one budged. I’m opposed to using guilt and shame as crowbars to move God’s people, so I ended by asking them to pray for their pastor, my wife, and me because we were going for it.

STEPPING OUT

As I walked away from the church, the Holy Spirit prompted me to ask my pastor friend if he had a video camera. I figured that the only way to help this group of Christians become more outwardly focused was to show them what an outward focus might look like.

We walked into the bar 15 minutes later. I introduced myself to a group of four, ranging from 18 to 21 years of age. I explained why I was in town and asked if they’d be willing to answer some questions about their experiences with the church. I encouraged them to keep it real because I’d be showing the video of our conversation the next day at my workshop. More than two hours later, the pastor, my wife, and I headed home from the bar after an exhilarating dialogue.

The flow of the conversation that evening went something like this: For 45 minutes I listened to this group share from their hearts about what had turned them off to church. As I listened, I got in touch with some of the things I had been wondering about, and at the appropriate time, I wondered out loud. These wondering questions (more about this in Chapter 6) stimulated their spiritual curiosity and opened the door for us to talk about spiritual matters. After an hour or so, they felt safe enough to ask their own questions about faith.

By the time our heart-to-heart exchange had ended, they asked me if it's possible to know for sure if they would end up in heaven. I had the privilege of sharing my faith story and the gospel with them. God's message had been hand-delivered to the appropriate spiritual address! (If you want to see for yourself what happened, you'll have to come to one of my workshops sometime. My schedule is posted at GodsGPS.com.)

The next morning, the people in my workshop were blown away by what they saw and heard on the video. God Space had been created in a place they had written off as the devil's playground. All I did was show up, jump on "God's teeter-totter" (more on that in Chapter 7), and let the Spirit lead.

THE FIRST MOVE

Both Christians and non-Christians have very real perceptions about one another that keep us from interacting in redeeming ways. It's been said that the only thing more difficult than getting the church to go to the world is getting the world to come to us. If showing up at each other's club is too scary for so many people, is there a way to create space in our daily interactions that might tear down some of the walls that keep us polarized?

I believe God wants Christians to make the first move. If I had chosen to stay at my club that night rather than head toward their club, nothing would have happened.

I firmly believe that if the American church doesn't grasp the implications of this need for Christians to move out of their comfort zones, 25 years from now we'll find ourselves in the same spiritual state as Europe and Canada. The local church used to be the heart and soul of American communities. Those days are slipping away fast, as church attendance continues to drop year after year nationwide. Today many churches need to face the cold, hard fact that if they closed their doors tomorrow, no one in the community

would miss them. It's as if we've forgotten that the early church in the book of Acts existed primarily for those who were *not* already Christ-followers.

Thom S. Rainer's research, documented in "Seven Sins of Dying Churches," supports this harsh reality. In a survey of churches across the U.S., he found that 95 percent of the ministries within the church are for church members alone. This statistic hit me like a baseball bat. I've had numerous experiences that have confirmed this inwardly focused mentality. The one that stands out best in my mind occurred during one of my workshops.

After I'd asked whether the church's budget reflected the heart of Jesus, one of the church leaders did some quick math to convert what I was saying into the bottom line. He had added the pastors' salaries, church employees' salaries, and all the other costs of keeping the church doors open. Then he'd divided that sum by the number of converts in the church's past year of ministry. He announced that in the past year, it had cost the church \$440,000 per convert. Ouch! Now please understand that "everything that can be counted does not necessarily count; everything that counts cannot necessarily be counted." (We can thank the famous "theologian" Albert Einstein for that insightful quote.) Nevertheless, it's hard to deny that many churches exist primarily to keep their club members happy.

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Rick Warren, author of *The Purpose Driven Life*, is even more piercing: "The church that doesn't want to grow is saying to the world, 'You can go to hell.'" Disturbing, isn't it? Nevertheless, many churches continue to operate essentially as clubs, convinced they'd be letting God down if they closed up shop and sold their buildings.

Don't get me wrong; I care deeply about the church. The bride of Christ is the hope of the world. "Bride bashing" is not my thing. However, I also care deeply about the people God misses the most—those who need a safe space to ask their questions, share their doubts, voice their concerns, and even vent their anger toward God and the church. They need space to bring their real selves out into the light, to journey one step at a time toward the

cross. If not-yet-Christians are convinced the church is not a safe space to experience community or inquire about their spiritual yearnings, where *is* that space? And what does that look like in a world that increasingly says no to our traditional God Spaces?

START FROM THE HEART

If we're going to create God Space for others, it has to start inside *us*. It takes safe people to create safe places. First Corinthians 6:19 says that when we become Christians, our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit. But Jesus did not send the Holy Spirit to simply *reside in* our bodies but to *preside over* them.

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Unfortunately, we're naturally predisposed toward resisting this holy takeover. *My* space, *my* desires, *my* needs, *my* money, *my* time—this “me, myself, and I” list of entitlements goes on forever. God wants to deliver us from this way of thinking. God Space begins where the natural gives way to the supernatural. We're urged, in Romans 12:1, to offer our bodies as living sacrifices. We can't create God Space until we've allowed God to create space in us first. The following story illustrates this truth.

MY AIRPLANE STORY

For 10 years, I served as ministry director for the Athletes in Action basketball team. During the fall, our team played college-basketball powerhouses like Duke, North Carolina, UCLA, Indiana, and Kentucky. At half-time or right after the game, our team was given the opportunity to share with the crowd how Christ had made a difference in our lives. Our travel schedule was usually horrendous, as we flew from city to city to play these schools before the regular season. Late nights and early mornings were all part of being on the road with AIA.

One particular season, our team played seven games in seven nights. After the sixth game, I was exhausted. The next morning we headed to the airport to catch a 6 o'clock flight. I waited until the very last minute to board so I could occupy a row with no one else in it, stretch out, and catch a nap

before we landed. I found several pillows, pulled down the window shade, stretched out, and began to enjoy the rest that my mind and body needed.

Just then I heard the flight attendant exhort a passenger to hurry because the plane was about to leave. The next thing I knew, the extrovert of all extroverts was asking for her seat on the aisle in the row I was trying to sleep in. I sat up and repositioned myself so she could sit down and I could go back to sleep. However, this was not what God had in mind.

Dianne introduced herself and asked me if I knew which basketball team was on board. I answered her as quickly as possible and lapsed back into a semi-comatose state. Dianne apparently did not have a grasp of the obvious, as she began to pepper me with questions about Athletes in Action. Her barrage of questions was stirring up a civil war within me. I prayed, "Please, God, I want to be off the clock for a while. I do not want to talk with this lady, let alone be your ambassador to her."

I don't know about you, but I never seem to wrestle with God and win. God wanted me to create space for him to work in this encounter. It's taken me a long time to truly understand what Jesus means when he tells us that we must lose daily if we are going to truly win (Luke 9:23). This death to self—*my* space—is where God Space begins to form. This is exactly what happened that day. I eventually gave in and allowed God to have his way in and through me. It didn't take long before the Holy Spirit began to guide me into Dianne's life.

I had no idea where the conversation would lead. After five minutes of everyday pleasantries, I learned that Dianne's passion was art. She excitedly shared her lifelong aspiration to move to Santa Fe and open her own art studio. I wondered aloud what was holding her back. She told me that her husband was not willing to leave Indianapolis, and I replied that it must be difficult to have the two loves of your life diametrically opposed to each other. Immediately she lowered her voice and said, "I've never told anyone this before, but I'm seriously considering leaving my husband and my son because I don't want this dream to go unfulfilled."

I asked for permission to share something I thought she might find helpful, and she granted it. I told Dianne that when I face major decisions, I like to play out the probabilities of where each decision might eventually lead. I asked her if she'd like to walk through this exercise, and she enthusiastically agreed. After five minutes, she came to the conclusion that choosing art

over family, or family over art, were both less than desirable. She said, “I feel like this is a no-win situation. What do you think I should do?”

Before I tell you what I told her, let’s replay this scene, dissecting it as we go.

I boarded the plane consumed by my agenda. The Holy Spirit wrestled with me to let go and to be open to God’s agenda for the duration of the flight. I eventually gave in. This death to self is *always* a prerequisite for creating God Space. Now that God had his way in me, he could also have his way in my conversation with Dianne. Spirit-led listening and wondering create safe places for people to bring their real selves into the light. When they do, they usually reveal a specific need that requires a divine solution.

Let’s get back to the conversation. I responded to Dianne’s question with the following “spiritual appetizer” (more on this in Chapter 8). I said, “When life’s problems exceed my finite resources, I like to talk to someone with infinite resources. All I can tell you, Dianne, is that when I pray, ‘coincidences’ seem to happen.”

Dianne immediately consumed my spiritual snack. Instantly the lights came on as she recalled a time in her life when she talked to God regularly. She said, “Those were the happiest days of my life.” Dianne’s heart immediately opened up, so I asked her if she’d be interested in looking at what the Bible has to say about seeking God for direction. Again, she was eager to hear. We spent the remainder of the flight using the Bible as the focal point for our “divine dialogue” (Chapter 9 develops that idea).

Have you ever stopped to wonder why these stories always seem to happen on airplanes? Every Christian speaker and leader I know seems to have an airplane story. I think it’s because on an airplane, your spirituality has no bearing on where you sit or whom you sit next to. God uses this to bring Christians and non-Christians together as fellow sojourners heading in the same direction. Common ground, close proximity, no cell phones, and the belief that you will never again see the people you are sitting next to create greater possibilities for the natural and the supernatural to collide in meaningful ways.

SOMEONE ELSE’S AIRPLANE STORY

The following happened to a man I deeply respect because he creates God Space everywhere he goes. His name is Harvey, and here’s his story—retold in

my words, with my interjections—to highlight what he did to create God Space.

Harvey was on a flight to Zurich, Switzerland, and was seated next to a woman from India named Badhra. Early in the flight, he discovered that she was living and working in the U.S. as a doctor, and was traveling to Mumbai to visit family. As they continued to talk, Harvey asked Badhra if she was of the Hindu faith. She said, “No, I am a Jainist, which is similar.”

Harvey responded, “That’s very interesting. I have not heard about Jainism. Would you mind telling me about your faith?” (*The conversation had reached this point because Harvey had taken a sincere interest in what mattered most to Badhra.*)

As she described Jainism, Harvey asked clarifying questions to better understand her faith. (*Harvey entered the conversation in humility, as a listener and a learner, seeking to understand before seeking to be understood.*)

Toward the end of their conversation, Harvey said, “I have found that most faiths have some hope attached to them to motivate people’s involvement. Tell me: What does the Jainist hope in?” (*Harvey continued to explore her worldview by raising sincere questions that he was wondering about.*)

She paused and then answered, “There is no hope in Jainism.” (*Knowing he had about 10 hours with Badhra, Harvey chose to say nothing about Christianity. Yet, He wisely chose instead to prayerfully wait on the Lord. Badhra may have been expecting an agenda from Harvey, but as she continued to experience space to go at her own pace, she developed trust.*)

Shortly after this conversation, their meals came, and they casually chatted as they ate. Afterward, Harvey read for a while. Later, Badhra turned to him and asked, “Am I right in assuming that you are a Christian?”

Harvey replied, “Yes, I am.”

“Oh, I have always wanted to know what it means to be a Christian. Would you mind telling me?”

Harvey did not hesitate to share the gospel with her. He wisely emphasized the hope that Christians have because of Jesus’ claims. (*Harvey cued into the lack of hope Badhra described in Jainism.*) Badhra listened carefully, asked thoughtful questions, and thanked Harvey profusely when he’d finished.

Later on in the flight, Badhra began talking to the man on the other side of her, Akmed, who was from Iran. Suddenly she turned to Harvey and said, “I have just been talking to Akmed, and I think you would enjoy our conversation. Akmed is a Muslim, and I have told him that you are a Christian and

I am a Jainist. He would like to hear more about Christianity—would you mind telling him what you told me?”

Harvey said he would be happy to, but suggested there might be a better way. “How about if I listen while you tell Akmed what you heard me say, and I’ll add or correct anything after you’ve finished? (*Harvey wisely asked Badhra to express what he had shared with her, so Badhra could internalize what she’d learned and deepen its impression upon her.*)

“Ah, very good,” Badhra said, and seemed delighted as she shared with Akmed. “How did I do?” she asked afterward. Harvey assured her that she had presented the gospel perfectly. This led to a stimulating spiritual conversation that lasted for several hours. (*Harvey intentionally created room by creating a safe place for these two people to do what we are all taught not to do: talk about religion. He didn’t make them go there; he created room for the possibility.*)

Though neither Badhra nor Akmed made a decision to become a Christian during the flight, Harvey was certain that they both now understood the gospel and the differences between Christianity and their own religions by the time they landed in Zurich. Now *that’s* an airplane story!

Here’s the million-dollar question: How do we *naturally* create room for spiritual conversations like that in our everyday lives? Surely God doesn’t intend for us to wait until our next ride on an airplane!

The following chapters are intended to answer this question by giving you one piece of the puzzle at a time. I hope that by the time you’ve finished this book, your confidence and competence will be stretched to the point that you’ll have your own stories to share.

So let’s begin with a broad working definition of God Space.

DEFINING GOD SPACE

God Space is where...

...God is felt and encountered in tangible ways that address the longings and cries of the heart.

...we come to the end of our own finite resources and experience the infinite resources of God.

...the natural gives way to the supernatural.

...seeds of faith are planted, watered, and nurtured.

...gentleness and respect are present, judgment is absent, and divine dialogue flows naturally because trust has been established.

...the invisible principles of God's kingdom are made visible in ways people can see, touch, and feel.

...friends of sinners—in other words, *our* friends—dwell.

...the topic of God can be explored freely without agendas, biases, and personal convictions getting in the way.

...cynics, skeptics, scoffers, and spiritually curious people alike can raise their questions, share their doubts, voice their concerns, and even vent their anger toward God and the church.

...the “unworthy” feel safe enough to bring their real selves out into the light, and to journey, one step at a time, toward the magnetic pull they sense deep in their souls.

...spiritual curiosity is aroused, and the message of Christianity becomes plausible.

From **INFORMATION** *to* **TRANSFORMATION**

This book is meant to be experienced, not merely read. Therefore, each chapter concludes with practical assignments, so you can begin *having* those experiences. If you approach these ideas with a teachable heart, the definitions of God Space that you've just read will, more and more, become your reality.

Jesus was called many things during his short time here on earth. My favorite title for him is found in Matthew 11:19 and Luke 7:34 where Jesus acknowledges his awareness of the fact that many were calling him “a friend of sinners.” In my mind, no title gets at the heart of why Jesus came to earth more than this one. It so closely coincides with his mission stated in Luke 19:10: “For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost.”

If we're going to make God's “invisible kingdom” become visible, then Christ's heart needs to be formed in us. Prayerfully ponder the following questions that reflect the essence of God Space. Grade yourself by using the following scale for each question. Jot down a number at the end of each question. When you have finished, add your numbers together to assess where you are in your journey.

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|-------|---|---|-----------|---|---|---|--------|---|----|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |
| NEVER | | | SOMETIMES | | | | ALWAYS | | |

1. Can you overlook un-Christlike attitudes and lifestyles in your efforts to connect with others?
2. Are you able to suspend your judgment for long periods of time around not-yet-Christians?
3. Do you consistently seek to understand the not-yet-Christians you know before seeking to be understood by them?
4. Are you patient enough to wait for the not-yet-Christians in your life to ask for your opinion?
5. Be honest: Do you *like* people who are far from God?
6. Do people who are far from God like *you*? For example: Are you invited to “party-parties”?
7. Does your body language communicate an open-hearted acceptance of the not-yet-Christians in your life?
8. Are you able to communicate acceptance to not-yet-Christians without endorsing their lifestyles?
9. In your relationships with not-yet-Christians, do you typically offer kindness rather than “rightness”?
10. Is your heart consistently broken and filled with compassion for the not-yet-Christians in your life?

85 to 100—Congratulations! You might be frequently misunderstood by Christians, but the not-yet-Christians in your life are undoubtedly drawn toward the heart of Jesus formed in you. Keeping walking in this light.

65 to 85—You must decrease, and Jesus must increase—one heart attitude at a time. Embrace the people and the situations in your life as God attempts to prune those heart attitudes that are not bearing fruit for his kingdom.

Under 65—Jesus needs to do something *in* you before he can do something *through* you. Consider spending less time doing religious activities, and more time asking God to do the soul surgery needed to form the heart of Jesus in you.