

Don't Talk to Strangers?

By Patrick Swayne

Chantelle, Ezekiel, and I were sitting in a small restaurant one Tuesday morning preparing to eat breakfast. The restaurant was so small that it featured only three or four tables, two of which were long tables. The expectation of the establishment's owners was that most patrons would sit together on those two long tables. As we were seated at one of those long tables, it was only a matter of time before one of Ezekiel's many faces, noises, and babblings caught the attention of a fellow restaurant goer who was sharing the table with us. The woman attempted to strike up a conversation with Ezekiel, but, as none of us had had much sleep the night before, he was in a grumpy/shy mood and wasn't interested. The woman said, "Oh that's OK, you're doing the right thing – you're not supposed to talk to strangers."

My wife and I both heard what that woman told Ezekiel a thousand times or more growing up. As a consequence, we, along with most people in our generation, have been trained to do just that – never to talk to strangers. To an extent, this oft-repeated rule is understandable – every day across our country, children are abducted or abused, property is stolen, people are murdered, and so on. It's entirely possible that this habit may have protected countless people in our generation from unforeseen evils, but what has it created?

It has created communities that lack community. After I shared the fact that my vehicle had been broken into, I was surprised at the number of people who responded with a similar story (or stories!). How can there be so much theft? While there are likely a number of causes for theft, I like to think that thieves find it easy to steal because they feel as though they are stealing from a car, not from a person. If there was a thriving community in place in which everyone knew each other, 1) there would be less theft as people would see each other instead of simply seeing each other's possessions, 2) there would be greater protection as the community could present a united front against crime, and 3) it would be easier to catch a thief as people would know the "likely suspects." However, communities cannot be created when strangers remain strangers.

It has ruined opportunities for evangelism and keeping the second great command. How easy do you find it to talk to someone you don't know about the gospel? Even if you're willing to do so because you've suppressed your childhood training, it's hard to find someone else who has. Further, how many opportunities do you discover to "love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22:39; Mark 12:31)? Our training to avoid strangers has created a self-reliance of sorts; people rarely share their needs even with those that they know and love, let alone strangers.

It has created a church culture that mirrors the community. Even though the church is supposed to be a loving family, it can easily disintegrate into a group of people who don't involve each other in their lives beyond a few hours a week. After all, unless you are born into a family already attending a church, it really is just a group of strangers, and too often, people seem content to keep it that way. This is not what God wants for His church (Acts 2:42-47), but it's happening throughout the brotherhood.

As parents, we will inevitably teach our boys (and any subsequent children God blesses us with) some of the safety lessons that we have been taught. It's important for children to know who they can and cannot go with and how to defend themselves against those who would harm them. But should my

sons be taught as a rule not to talk to strangers? Should I practice that as a rule? I have to say no to both of those questions.

Satan wants desperately for people to withdraw themselves from one another both inside and outside the church. He wants this because person to person communication is God's primary means both for communicating the gospel and building up souls. If Satan can get people isolated, they become easy prey. By all means, stay safe, but don't allow physical safety to trump spiritual safety. "And I say to you, My friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body, and after that have no more that they can do. But I will show you whom you should fear: Fear Him who, after He has killed, has power to cast into hell; yes, I say to you, fear Him!" (Luke 12:4-5).