

# What do you say when someone asks you -

## *'How are you?'*

By Robert Weston

We've all done it – breezed up casually to people before or after church and asked them, how they are – and then wondered why they reacted as they did. We've all been on the receiving end of such well-meaning questions, too, when we are in too much grief to know how to respond.

'How are you?' I suspect the phrase has been enough to drive some people to distraction. It may even have made them want to stay away from church altogether! The way we ask this question, and the leeway we give them not to answer the question directly, calls for etiquette, wisdom and discernment.

Someone who habitually puts on a, 'I'm fine thank you' sort of face effectively cuts the conversation dead. By contrast, regular 'gushers' need only the slightest of invitations to pour out a jet stream of their uncertainties, troubles and complaints. On the one hand, along the lines of 'Better out than in,' this may be a helpful release.

But the person who hears us spouting may find there is too much to spray around, and be rather less than willing to ask such leading questions next time round!

In the split second between someone asking us the question and our needing to make a reply, we have to make numerous assessments. Has the person concerned the capacity to bear the load we are about to dump on them? It would be unwise to dump a ten-ton load on a bridge designed to withstand far less!

Perhaps we can pray something along these lines: 'Lord, help me not to gush inappropriately, lest I overwhelm the person I am sharing with!'

We must be careful whom we share our deepest heart with. Human nature being what it is, sharing our weaknesses with certain types of people may incline them to feel superior to us. They begin to define us as "having the problem that we have shared with them". This is likely to preclude any real chance of the relationship developing.

Our problems may well benefit from advice and counselling – but when a person starts to enjoy being strong because we are weak and vulnerable, or puts on a holier than thou or a 'counselling' tone of voice, true authenticity is in danger of being lost.

Difficult times are discovering times. Like many others who have been perceived over the years as having a strong 'platform' ministry, there have been times when people have drawn alongside us in order to derive a sense of position for themselves. But if we are going through rough times ourselves, such people are far less eager to be around. Just as the Lord reserves the recounting for the things that distress Him with those who draw closes to Him, so it is wise to make oneself vulnerable only with those who have the maturity to cope with it.

Once you put someone on a pedestal, there is only one way to go: down! Someone who means a lot to me said years ago, 'I'm going to take you off the pedestal I am in danger of putting you on so that we can be friends!' I am so grateful for that attitude. This is the difference between mere acquaintances and true friends – those who will stick with us through thick and thin.

It is not wrong to be somewhat cautious, therefore, how we answer this seemingly simple question. To be discreet is not at all the same thing as being a hypocrite! We can be sure that Jesus would have shared certain issues with Peter, James and John that He would not have mentioned to the seventy two disciples, let alone to people He met and ministered to in the street.

We are perfectly within our rights to say that 'there are problems' without feeling any need or pressure to reveal what those problems are to all and sundry. Jesus "knew what was in a man and therefore He did not trust Himself to them." (John 2:24-25)

### **Sharing that releases others**

At another level, however, we have often found that sharing the difficulties that we are going through helps others to speak of their own difficulties. We took the calculated decision to share to a wide audience as much as we decently could about the pressures Ros came under in the workplace a few years ago. The number of people who got in contact to share dreadful experiences they too had had of severe intimidation in the work place – and the appalling toll it had taken on their mind and body – amazed us. We would almost certainly have remained in the dark concerning these people's sufferings unless we had 'made ourselves vulnerable' and opened up in the way that they did.

When I know that people are going through difficult times, I often delve a bit deeper. Doctors have their own way of doing this. When a patient is waffling on seemingly endlessly about minor ailments, the only way to get to the heart of the matter may be to appear to draw the session to a close. That is when the person says, 'Oh, by the way . . .' and proceeds to share the matter that is really troubling them!

Another good thing about sharing your problems openly is that it draws people into your pilgrimage. So often we give testimonies when a situation is nearly wrapped up and concluded. "I had a problem . . . but God sorted it out." By contrast, working through it with others means you are working together in the midst of the situation – and this can often be a good starting point for going deeper people with that person.

As surely as sharing our difficulties in such ways may be 'prophetic wisdom in action,' there is also an intrusive insistence that lures people further out than they are ready to go. Two years after Ros's painful experiences, she was well aware that the bulk of her grief was still locked up, as it were in a vault.

When some friends came round to dinner, I made the mistake of trying too hard to flush them into the open, thinking this would be an ideal couple to pray with. It turned out to be entirely the wrong time, and it hurt her. A few days later, when some other friends came round, and we were praying, the Lord Jesus met with Ros in a beautiful way. As His presence increased, He drew the sting of the grief out as it were in one oiled sweep. What my insensitive probing had failed to do, the presence of God did easily.

We do not need to apologise for not opening up fully, therefore, no matter how hard people push: 'No, how are you really?' With practice we learn to tell the difference between self-appointed counsellors 'trawling for business', gossips who are out for some tasty titbits and those who love and care for us enough to ask the very same question from a heart full of concern for our well being.

We also have to consider their ability, discretion and trustworthiness – though to some extent, we may only really discover this by trial and error. More than anything else, it comes down to the condition of their heart. Suppose you choose to make yourself vulnerable and reply, 'Actually, I'm having real difficulty trusting the Lord about . . .' The person looks down on you from their supposedly more spiritual standpoint and unthinkingly responds, 'all you need to do is to trust the Lord – brother.' The effect is to make you feel as though they have rapped you on the shins!

You go to another person and share precisely the same thing. They pause for a moment, and then reply to the same effect, 'Hmm – just trust the Lord, Robert.' This time, instead of being made to feel small (which is liable to make you cross) you feel reassured. Your trust levels begin to rise again.

What is the difference between these outwardly identical responses? The compassionate heart of the enquirer – and the sense that this person has one ear on the Lord as well as one ear on you. Without knowing all the ins and outs of our situation, we sense that they have taken the matter to the Lord, and gained His reassurance that they can reassure you! The Lord is in charge of this situation, and will work it out. Such reassurance kindles our faith and trust. It is priceless.

God bless your conversations in the church foyer or on the phone, when people ask you how you are – and when the roles are reversed! May the Lord make you trustworthy listeners, knowing when to reach out and when just to silently love, pray and embrace.