

Spiritual Conversations: A First Step in Evangelism

with Matt Snell

DURING JESUS'S TIME ON EARTH, he constantly demonstrated sacrificial love—whether in washing his disciples' feet, though they were about to betray him, or ultimately in his torturous death on the cross. He also exhibits his great heart for those who did not have a relationship with him. “When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd” (Mt. 9:38). Jesus's compassion led to action. He succinctly declared, “The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost” (Lk. 19:10). Jesus's heart for the world and our role as Christians to participate in his “seeking and saving the lost” most famously coincide in his final command before his ascension, often called the “Great Commission” (Mt. 28:18b-20):

“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

As essential parts of loving others and making disciples, Jesus's command shows that evangelism and discipleship go hand in hand. With the latter, he tells his followers to “[teach] them to observe all that I command.”¹ The Great Commission also drips with a focus on non-Christians—in the call to “go,” to make disciples of “all nations,” and to “baptize” new members of God's family. It can be said that evangelism and discipleship are different sides of the disciple-making coin.² For many people, evangelism is the more difficult piece, and it is common to struggle to obey Jesus's call to love non-Christians by attempting to share the good news about him. Since it is so critically important and a significant area to develop for many, this will be the first of three guides on evangelism.³ Some may just see the word “evangelism” and start to experience sweaty palms, shortness of breath, and an overwhelming desire to run away (or maybe schedule a business trip for next week). If that's you, hang in there... and keep reading. This guide is designed to address common concerns about evangelism and to equip you to make spiritual conversations a part of your life as a follower of Jesus.

¹ For a focus on discipleship, cf. “Prioritizing Personal Discipleship” and “A Multiplying Chain of Disciples;” both are available in the *Discipleship Journey Guidebook* and at djourney.org/guides.

² Further, since Jesus commanded believers to evangelize, it is a part of “all that [he] commands” that we must “teach [others] to observe” (Mt. 28:20). In other words, teaching evangelism and obedience in it are necessary parts of discipleship.

³ The second guide about evangelism is “Your Story: Share His Wondrous Works,” and the third is “The Bridge Illustration & Sharing the Gospel Clearly;” both available in the *Discipleship Journey Guidebook* and at djourney.org/guides.

BUT... I DON'T WANT TO TALK ABOUT EVANGELISM!

If the topic of evangelism makes you nervous, rest assured, you're not alone. Even the Apostle Paul wrestled with fears about evangelism. In Ephesians 6:19, he wrote, "Pray also for me, that whenever I open my mouth, words may be given me so that I will *fearlessly* make known the mystery of the gospel" (emphasis added). So where do these fears of evangelism come from? In his book *The Heart of Evangelism*,⁴ Jerram Barrs identifies four internal barriers that impede our evangelistic efforts.

The first barrier that trips many of us up is *guilt* over missed opportunities or past failures. Let's face it, evangelism is something that most Christians know they are supposed to do but have trouble executing and as a result experience guilt. Rather than spurring us on in our Christian witness, guilt crushes us under regret about missed opportunities or half-hearted attempts.

Another barrier that hinders our progress toward evangelism is a *lack of confidence*. We doubt both our ability to present the gospel clearly and to effectively respond to the objections that our friends may raise.

We can also trip over the barrier of *uncertainty about evangelistic methods*. In the past, you may have been presented with "the way" to do evangelism. Over-focus on method, technique, and "selling" the gospel can cause us to veer away from the heart of sharing the gospel.

The final barrier which Barrs describes is *overcommitment*. By overcommitment, Barrs is talking about "inner anxiety about overcommitting ourselves or wanting to avoid having our privacy and personal space invaded by strangers we really don't desire to know."⁵ Overcommitment also involves the common dilemma faced by many Christians who are so busy with Christian activities that they don't have relational space to spend time with non-Christians.

COMPELLED BY LOVE

Now that we've identified some of the barriers to evangelism, how shall we proceed? As always, our first step must be to bring our guilt, lack of confidence, uncertainty, and overcommitment to Jesus. Rather than try harder, we must rest in his grace and experience his love. Paul says that our experience of his unfathomable, reconciling love for us compels us to faithfully take his message of reconciliation to the world as his ambassadors (2 Cor. 5:14a, 18b-20):

"For the love of Christ controls us... Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us."

As we experience the reality of God's grace and love, we are motivated to step out in faith.

⁴Jerram Barrs, *The Heart of Evangelism* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2001), 129-134.

⁵ Ibid., 134.

WHO HAS GOD PLACED AROUND YOU?

A good place to start with evangelism is to think about the non-Christians already in your life. Who are they? When and where do you see them? What are their concerns? Some people can easily come up with a list with dozens of names, others, not so much. When I first tried this exercise, I was really discouraged. I could barely come up with five names. As I sat with that discouragement for a bit, I first realized that I was overcommitted, having little space in my life for non-Christians (see “overcommitment” above), and needed to talk with Jesus about that. However, as I continued to think about the various contexts in my life, I realized that there were many more opportunities than I first believed. I regularly interacted with other parents while watching my kids’ sports practices and games, the clerk I always see at my local coffee shop or grocery store, the guy I always see at the gym, etc. Who would be on your list—a neighbor, coworker, or extended family member? Who would you be thrilled to see come to a saving faith in Jesus? Would you commit to asking God for an opportunity to start a spiritual conversation with one of these people?

WHAT IS A SPIRITUAL CONVERSATION, AND HOW CAN I HAVE ONE?

A spiritual conversation entails prayerfully looking for natural opportunities to dialogue with people about spiritual things. It’s a way to be faithful in evangelism—attempting to move someone closer to saving faith, in the power of the Holy Spirit, and leaving the results to God. Evangelism doesn’t necessarily have to include knocking on someone’s door and walking him through an evangelistic booklet or the “Romans Road.”⁶ Spiritual conversations aren’t as hard as you may think and people are more open to it than you may believe. Pastor Tim Keller has developed a list of eleven things that we can do to encourage spiritual conversations.⁷ Here are four to get you started:

1. Let others know of your Christian faith and activities in natural ways (e.g., talking casually about church attendance and events).
2. Ask questions about other people’s beliefs and experiences with faith and church and simply listen appreciatively and sympathetically.
3. Describe briefly and naturally how you process some difficult personal problem—some misfortune or some mistreatment—by using your faith to help you get strength or grant forgiveness.
4. Offer to pray regularly for a friend, neighbor, or colleague who is facing a challenging situation.

LISTENING AND WONDERING IN SPIRITUAL CONVERSATIONS

So, you’ve stepped out in faith, and the conversation has begun. Now what? In his book *God Space: Where Spiritual Conversations Happen Naturally*,⁸ Doug Pollock explains the benefits of listening as we start and nurture spiritual conversations. Pollock describes how many well-meaning Christians commit

⁶ A conversation can be evangelistic—discussing spiritual things—even if it doesn’t explicitly involve an articulation of the gospel, which a non-Christian might not be ready to receive.

⁷ The complete list can be found at: www.timothykeller.com/blog/2011/8/1/the-lay-ministry-dynamic

⁸ Doug Pollock, *God Space: Where Spiritual Conversations Happen Naturally* (Loveland, CO: Group, 2009), Chapters 5-6.

conversational missteps in their attempts to share the gospel. Rather than listening well, we may be overfocused on steering the conversation toward a specific outcome. This turns the spiritual conversation into a monologue. Another pitfall is trying to move too quickly in our spiritual conversations. In our anxiety, we may try to unload all our facts on someone who shows the slightest interest in spiritual matters. In spiritual conversations, Pollock reminds us that “often more is less, and less is more.” Finally, in our spiritual conversations, we can fail to recognize the signals that our friends and co-workers are sending. Our over-focus on the goal of delivering the message of salvation may cause us to overlook key indicators of the person’s receptivity to the gospel and derail the work that the Holy Spirit is doing. Do we need to speed up, slow down, or take a break in the conversation? So, how do we avoid these missteps? In Galatians 5:25, Paul encourages us to “keep in step with the Spirit.” Accordingly, the alternative to reckless evangelism is “Spirit-led listening” which is humble, accepting, respectful, non-judgmental, agenda-free, and compassionate.⁹

Spirit-led listening creates an environment for people to open up and better understand themselves and their worldviews. Pollock also explains that it feeds “wondering,” which involves listening reflectively and asking questions to help people think through the implications and inconsistencies of their beliefs. Wondering provides a trajectory for our questions and, for Pollock, is the key to improving both the “quantity and quality” of our spiritual conversations. Keeping in mind that any phrase can be overused, beginning a question with “I’m wondering” softens the language, demonstrates sincerity, and prevents us from dominating the conversation with our own worldview.¹⁰

In our spiritual conversations, questions are usually more important than answers. Consider Jesus, who despite knowing *all* the answers, asked over three hundred questions in the gospels—and most often answered a question with a heart-probing question. Good wondering questions demonstrate careful listening, promote more dialogue and reflection, probe sensitively into someone’s belief system, and whet an appetite to explore Jesus or the Christian life.

HERE ARE SOME OF POLLOCK’S QUESTIONS TO GET YOU STARTED:¹¹

1. I’ve made it a goal to learn from others; what’s the greatest lesson you’ve learned so far in your life’s journey?
2. Would you mind sharing with me the greatest piece of wisdom ever passed on to you?
3. Have you ever met anyone or experienced anything that made God seem real to you?
4. Have you had an experience in which you felt the presence of God?
5. If God called you on your cell phone and gave you the opportunity to ask him one question, what would you ask him, and why?

⁹ Ibid., 56.

¹⁰ Ibid., 65-74.

¹¹ Ibid., 63, 74, 109-111. Some of the questions have been adapted.

6. I'm wondering if you only had six months left to live, what would be on your list of things to do? Why?
7. I'm wondering what would you like to say to Christians if you knew they would listen?
8. I'm wondering what do you understand the core message of Christianity to be?
9. I wondering what concerns you the most about possibly letting God change your life?
10. I'm wondering what role religion has played in shaping your life.
11. I'm wondering what is at the root of your emotions right now?
12. That's an interesting perspective; I'm wondering how you arrived at that conclusion.
13. As we've been talking, I've heard you talk about several things that seem to be missing in your life right now. I'm wondering if you're searching for something that's capable of filling those voids?

Pray for the non-Christians around you and that God would give you opportunities to have a spiritual conversation with them. God may use a spiritual conversation to bring their innermost beliefs to the surface and reveal to them “a specific need that requires a divine solution.”¹² If so, they'll be one step closer to experiencing how their deepest needs can be satisfied in a relationship with Jesus.

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Answer these questions on your own and then discuss them with your discipleship partners:

1. Describe your initial reaction to the topic of evangelism.
2. Which of Barrs's four barriers to evangelism (the wall of guilt, lack of confidence, uncertainty about evangelistic methods, or overcommitment) most impacts your willingness to engage in evangelism?

¹² Ibid., 18.

3. How can you trust God and not yourself to deal with this barrier?
4. Make a list of five non-Christians already in your life. Are you willing to commit to asking God for an opportunity to start a spiritual conversation with one of these people?
5. How might you use one of Keller's four suggestions to start a spiritual conversation with someone on your list? Think about a specific person and a specific way you would incorporate one of his suggestions.
6. Which of Pollock's questions do you want to remember and use with someone on your list?
7. Trusting the Spirit and fueled by the love and acceptance of Jesus, what's one action step that you'd like to commit to in the upcoming month?

THIS GUIDE IS FREELY AVAILABLE AT DJOURNEY.ORG.