

Spiritual Conversations

By Erin Delcarson Fonner

Conversations and spirituality: two aspects so central to our existence. So why, when put together, do they cause so much confusion and disillusionment?

Evangelical Christians, I have discovered, often times don't really know how to have conversations about their own spirituality. They want to effectively share their faith but usually end up at one of two extremes: forcefully or not at all. So in a time where the common worldview is one of religion tolerance and equality, how do we stand for the truth in a way that intrigues others rather than repulses them?

First, I must preface that ultimately it is God who brings people to Himself, and we can trust His promises from Exodus 4 and Luke 12 where He assures His followers that He Himself will help us speak and give us words to say at the right moment. What a relief! We can agree with Paul who says, *"My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power"* (1 Corinthians 2:4-5). If we just make ourselves available, God will meet us where we are and guide us.

I have heard many times of Christians and churches measuring their success by the number of people who have "prayed the prayer" or have "come into the kingdom" or however you want to say it. Praise God for all those who have! May we dance with the angels over each soul who finds eternal peace with God! But we cannot measure our success as evangelists by the number of conversions, because it is not our role to convert! If we truly believe that "it is because of Him that you are in Christ Jesus" (1 Corinthians 1:30), then we should **count conversations, not conversions**. We are called to be the witnesses, not the lawyers. It is not our job to win.

Have you let go of the burden of converting people? Really? Because I've heard plenty of people say they have, yet they still count conversions. When we truly let go of this, when we truly separate ourselves from converting people, then the pressure associated with evangelism dissipates, and all that is left is two people journeying together towards a spirituality that we all crave.

Resting in God's sovereignty, we can also train ourselves to be godly (1 Timothy 4:7), and this includes learning to have spiritual dialogues that look like Jesus's. Some of the simplest lessons can make a world of difference as we open up a spiritual dialogue. We must **match our communication style to the needs of the listener**. This requires knowledge of their needs and also an awareness of how to adjust our communication to meet them where they are.

First, we must **discover the question behind the question**. If someone asks, “Why is there so much suffering in the world?” you could expound on free will and the freedom to choose good or evil. Or instead you could get to know the person a little more to discover what she is really asking. Was her baby born with birth defects? If so, the real question is probably, “Why would God let this happen to my baby?” If this is the case, then she needs sympathy, not a sermon. Unfortunately, in our zeal to bring people into the kingdom, we often choose the former and miss the real question altogether! No matter how good our answer may be, if we are answering the wrong question, it is all for naught.

Also, we must speak the same language, and I’m not just talking to missionaries abroad. You may think you are both speaking English, but it is wise to **define the terms**. I learned this lesson when conversing with some members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, commonly known as the Mormons. The first time I had a spiritual dialogue with a Mormon, I was shocked to find out that they believe in the Heavenly Father, in Jesus Christ, and in the Holy Ghost. They also believe in the atonement, preach the gospel, and read the Bible. I hadn’t defined the terms, so after talking with them, I wondered why so many Christians viewed them as a cult! They seemed to believe just like me!

Through conversations just like this, the LDS church has succeeded in misleading the general public. However, their Heavenly Father was once a man of flesh and bones, their Jesus is our older brother (as is Satan), the Holy Ghost is not omnipresent, believing in the atonement does not guarantee heaven, their gospel is the laws and ordinances of the LDS church, and their Bible has been amended and added to by Joseph Smith! As you can see, we as Christians can never assume that those who do not yet have a relationship with Jesus Christ speak our language. False assumptions can have dangerous consequences.

Every evangelism training class I have attended has focused on propositional truth. While I think a nice diagram or four easy steps are great tools to disciple new believers, and perhaps they are effective with certain individuals, I as a seeker was personally repulsed by them. “How dare you simplify God into four easy steps?” I had absolutely no interest in a God that could fit in a man-made box.

Propositional truth essentially implies, “I am right, and you are wrong, and now I’m going to explain what I believe, and if you decide to believe my propositions, then you will be on the winning team with me!” Of course, that’s never our intention, but that’s how seekers hear it. Remember, the message sent is often not the message received!

So how do we get around this dilemma? Let’s look at what Jesus did. In Matthew 22, Jesus tells the parable of the wedding banquet. Now, He could have proposed, “The only way to get to heaven is by accepting my free gift of grace. Otherwise, you will go to hell.” But instead, He chose to tell a story. All

the above elements are in there, but **telling a story minimizes the “you versus me” feel**. Everyone loves a good story, and we feel less threatened by them. Also, we tend to remember stories better. Most non-Christians at least believe in Jesus as a good moral teacher, so why not use His teachings to spark dialogue?

Like a little kid who has seen a movie before, we are eager to give away the ending. But I challenge you to **ask questions far more than you ever give answers**. When I go through the parable of the wedding banquet with someone, I never explain the symbolism but instead draw it out of them with questions. If their guess doesn't line up with the parable, I'll ask more questions to explore the possibility until that logic unravels. Then I'll go back and ask, “So if it's not that, what else could it be?” **Questions will provoke them to discover truth for themselves rather than make them feel like they are conforming.**

In Tom Stoppard's play, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, the two main characters hold entire conversations filled with nothing but questions. They **answer questions with questions**. Throughout the gospels, we can find Jesus doing just that.ⁱ This is what our evangelism training should be, learning to lead others to realize truth for themselves rather than feeding them a steak dinner before they're even hungry.

In our efforts to become more like Jesus, we must sanctify our communication. As we approach the gospels from a communicator's standpoint, we will see that Jesus trusts God, tailors His communication to the needs of the listener, and incorporates stories and questions. As we implement these characteristics into our own dialogues, we will feel more comfortable discussing spiritual issues, which will open the doors wide for the Spirit to do His work.

ⁱ See Matthew 9:14-15, 12:10-11, 15:2-3, 19:3-5, 21:23-24, 22:17-20; Mark 2:7-9, 2:18-19, 2:24-25, 10:2-3, 12:15-16, 12:23-24; Luke 2:49, 5:22, 5:34, 6:2-3, 6:9, 7:24-26, 7:40-43, 10:25-26, 11:18-19, 12:41-42, 14:3-5, 15:4, 15:8, 18:18-19, 20:2-3, 20:22-24; John 6:60-61, 16:18-19, 18:22-23, 18:33-34, 21:21-22