

The Conversations that Connect series

Jesus talked with people, with an ear open to the Spirit

Jesus throughout his ministry demonstrated how conversational skills were central to his engagement of people. From him we can learn how to identify or hear the things said in conversation that could provide an easy platform for a great conversation about spiritual things because, once identified, all that is needed in such a situation is to ask a simple question or two.

Let us have some fun now with what is called the question game. Two people will come up front and have a conversation, but they can only ask questions. The first person to stumble, delay answering, reply with a question that does not make sense, or make a statement is out. The other wins...

The point of the Game is this: The key to great conversations is good questions. With practice it's possible to say things using almost nothing but questions. This is an approach to witnessing I believe sits well with our culture at this time.

As Christians in the Church we have **Our Mission**: Without Christ people are without ultimate hope! The saving message of Jesus is not tied to any culture or people group. God loves all, and is not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance (2 Peter 3:9). To summarise Jesus' mission, he came to seek and save what was lost (Luke 19:10). The Great Commission (Matthew 28:19-20) describes our mission. It has two parts:

- (1) Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising...
- in this we share the gospel, they respond, and we Baptise them.
- (2) We then teach them to obey Jesus' teachings, all his commands, which is basic discipleship. But this is not easy because of the challenge we face.

A present challenge: people seem very disinterested.
Why is this? What might be going on here?

Introduction to postmodernism:

It has been said, regarding religion in today's world that, "the West is becoming more like the East and the East is becoming more like the West" [Ravi Zacharias].

Postmodernism means 'after the modern era'. The modern era was the time from the industrial revolution onwards during which western culture believed *humans would find answers* –

medical scientists would cure cancer, economists bring wealth, behavioural scientists would 'reprogram' drug addicts and criminals, preachers would bring hope and life, the welfare state would care for the poor and global governments would end war. Then they all failed us.

The result of which has been this:

1. We became Sceptical of truth claims as a culture - like all the above people's claims;
2. Mass rejection of moral absolutes - with no belief in one God there is no basis for a fixed definition of morals/morality; and
3. Indifference toward religion – people are not interested, because they feel they 'know' that no religion is actually true.

So, if you share the gospel with someone a common response is:

'I'm really glad you've found something that works for you!

For me – I've got my own beliefs'

Or *'You've got your truth... and I've got mine.'*

The question then begs...

Question: How do you tell the truth to someone who does not believe 'truth' exists?

Answer: You talk with them about it!

This is what this series is about.

Reading: John 4:4-26 The Samaritan woman at the well

Two ears to hear with: The Samaritan woman John 4:4-26

From our reading this morning we can determine these 3 things:

1. [That] Jesus had a conversational approach

In communicating with and relating to people He was an expert in conversation. His first question v.7, "Will you give me a drink?" broke cultural norms, as is referred to in verse 9. She was a Samaritan and therefore 'unclean' as far as she knew according to the Jews who would become ceremonially unclean if they used a drinking vessel handled by a Samaritan. It is almost humorous. Jesus' conversation borders on playfulness when he answers making the statement that he does in v.10. A statement she had no way of understanding but she does catch on to the playful humorous intent of it. Hence her reply is in a humorous tone in vv11-12 – likely the same type of humour.

Sometimes we think our small conversations in the course of the day don't matter because we consider them 'small talk' and a waste of time. Well they are not.

Such a conversation is a precursor to 'big' talk. And questions are the key to conversations. If you don't think this woman was playing along with Jesus in a fun conversation then re-read vv13-15... It is not until verse 16 that the crunch comes and Jesus asks a question that significantly changed the tone of the conversation. Jesus made a habit of talking with people, wherever He was. He gave people his time and attention that lead to asking wise questions. If we're going to influence people toward Christ, we will need to pay attention, listening with both ears in order to do the same.

The second thing that we can determine from our reading is that **2. Jesus and the Holy Spirit worked together constantly** Jesus and the Holy Spirit worked together on everything. God can speak to us all in quiet ways. For example, Jesus said "My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me." John 10:27.

The whole point of Jesus sending the Spirit to his believers in the church at Pentecost was to empower us disciples for our Mission as his witnesses (Acts 1:8). The same Spirit that bestows upon every believer at least one gift. Now Jesus used the 'gifts of the Spirit' including the Word of knowledge, Wisdom, discernment and the Prophetic gifting in natural, everyday conversations. He never said, "Thus says the Lord...". But the Holy Spirit was needed for Jesus to have known what He did about the private life, past and present of the Samaritan woman in vv17-18. And just as in the case of Jesus, God can lead us in our conversations by his spirit, in the questions we ask.

The third thing that we determine from our reading that **3. Jesus broke the cultural norms of the day** As far as Jesus was concerned, those who needed reaching included ALL people - all cultures, ages, races, genders, sexualities and beliefs. And he was prepared to break the cultural norm of the day that Jewish men didn't talk with Samaritan women, in order to proclaim this. It was the apostle Paul who illustrates this point when he said '*I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some*' (1 Corinthians 9:22). Our lives are not ultimately about what we can get – but about what we can give! Relating well to a wide range of people requires an attitude of love and giving.

Life Application - 'Hearing conversations'

With Kiwi culture being what it is I am sure that we will each know at least one person who does not seem to have an interest in Christianity at all! And that we have no idea exactly why.

As Christians we would like to encourage them toward faith, but, we don't know how. There is a way that I will call a 'Hearing' conversation, which is where we begin to talk with a person with the express purpose of seeking to hear what might be hindering them from talking about, or considering faith in Jesus.

Now, in a 'hearing conversation' we ask general questions in an effort to identify areas that we might be able to discuss in more detail, by then asking more specific questions in those areas.

In effect we are actually **Listening for a 'sour note'**.

If we are listening to a choir and someone sings out of tune, 'sour notes' they stand out - you can hear it. It is the responsibility of the choirmaster to pick up on it and to correct it. In the same way, when you're in a conversation and someone says something that doesn't seem right to us, if we can pick up on it, it can become a doorway for meaningful conversation to begin.

Take for example the question of suffering when someone asks: **How can God be real when there is so much evil in the world? Consider the 'sour notes':**

1. Such a thing as 'evil' doesn't even exist if God doesn't – so the question is logically self-defeating. It is irrational in itself.
2. Evil's existence does not prove there is no God, as what is to say a 'God' doesn't exist who is evil?
3. They are assuming God is wrongly responsible for evil, and are probably unaware of the incomparable answer that Christianity offers to the problem of evil and suffering. Suffering and evil are a global religious problem, not a Christian problem! When answers are compared, the Christian answer alone provides dependable hope because the hope, if any, offered by other religions is not 'dependable' in the sense that they have only a limited assurance of salvation in comparison to what Christ offers. Also other cults and religions definitions of the hope of heaven are considerably different, from the Word of God in a Christian's Bible.
i.e. the Koran and the Book of Mormon.

So when someone states to you or asks you the question of How can God be real when there is so much evil in the world? [Remember the question game...]

Consider these following questions to ask in return:

- What do you mean by evil? Where do you get that definition from? Why do you blame God for it?
- Do you think any of the other religions has a better explanation?
- What do you abandon God in favour of?
- Has it occurred to you that you might not yet actually understand what the Bible says about evil and suffering?
- Could I share how I understand this?

But we should also consider that their comments may very well be emotionally motivated. This being the case then a good question to ask is this- “You seem to feel strongly on this. Why is that?” Maybe they recently faced a tragedy or difficult circumstances, in which case they need compassion while going through pain.

The point is this: If we don't first listen to truly hear the 'sour notes' we will not know what to ask. And if we don't bother to ask a few questions we will never know what they really believe in the first place, let alone why. We'll have missed a very real opportunity – for they stated a religious belief!

Summary:

Jesus demonstrated the power of a conversational approach and the same approach works in our day and time. Through nothing but questions we can:

1. Initiate selfless conversations; in which we
2. Identify 'sour notes' as potential conversation points; which we
3. Investigate with nothing but questions also!

And this is a method that comes across as less threatening for the person we are in conversation with which at it's best can be considered completely non-threatening by the other person concerned!

But it begins with hearing what people are really saying – taking a selfless interest, with our two ears wide open to hear.

The challenge I leave you with this morning is:

Why not try it this week, and see what God does?

The Material contained in this sermon was made available from Hope Project Media NZ who note that Credits for the overall direction of tis series go to Dr Norm Geisler & Dr David Geisler, from their book 'Conversational Evangelism' (see meeknessandtruth.org). We have partnered with Dr David in a couple of things, & have summarised (with permission) a number of points from his Conversational Evangelism material among the content of the three chapters in Dave Mann's book, 'Because we care' that address this topic area. This book can be purchased at bigbookpublishing.co.nz.