

**The Conversations that Connect series:**  
*Jesus talked with people, with an ear open to the Spirit*  
**One spirit to listen with      John 1:43-51**

**Introduction:** In this series we're considering how Jesus employed a very conversational approach in the way he engaged with and ministered to people. Last week the message 'Two ears to hear with', highlighted the importance of talking with people around us each day, and how if we learn to listen, it is not difficult to find opportunities to talk about faith. Today, the message 'One spirit to listen with' is from the account of when Jesus first met Nathaniel [John 1:43-51]. Before we start, did anyone have a great opportunity to practice what we talked about last week, asking questions in an effort to encourage faith in God?

In our gospel reading today John is recollecting how Jesus continued the calling of his first disciples. The fact that Jesus *found* Philip suggests he probably already knew him. Philip then introduced Jesus and Nathanael to each other.

**Who is Nathaniel?**

Nathanael is also known as Bartholomew in the lists of disciples in the gospels. They are one in the same person. Nathanael was a man who loved God, and who sought out God's truth. The fact that Philip went to tell him they had found the Messiah indicates this was of great interest to him. He was found under the shade of a fig tree – a common place in those days for study and prayer. Nathaniel's reply to Philip's comment that Jesus came from Nazareth, 'Nazareth! *Can anything good come from there?*' indicates that he knew the scripture stating that the Messiah would come from Bethlehem. Jesus said of Nathaniel, by divine Word of knowledge in v47 "*Here is a true Israelite, in whom there is nothing false*".

**Let's reflect on the conversation between Jesus & Nathanael**

V47 *When Jesus saw Nathanael approaching, he said of him, "Here is a true Israelite, in whom there is nothing false."* - which is quite some compliment!

*"How do you know me?" Nathanael asked?*

It is clear from Nathaniel's response that Jesus and he did not yet know each other. We see again how involved the Holy Spirit was in the daily ministry of Jesus.

V48b-49 Jesus answered, “I saw you while you were still under the fig tree before Philip called you.” Then Nathanael declared, “Rabbi, you are the son of God; you are the King of Israel.”

Nathanael saw just two evidences that Jesus was anointed by God, and willingly believed. An amazing response. Few people are as hungry for God and for truth, or as ready to believe when faced with a miracle, as Nathanael was. From this encounter we learn that:

**Point 1: God works with us in ministry** It is undeniable that the Spirit’s work was key to Jesus’ success in ministering to hearts. By the Spirit’s revelation, Jesus knew things He could not have known otherwise. If we want to be effective as witnesses for Jesus we do well to seek to be sensitive to what God the Spirit whispers to us. Asking questions more than we talk when in conversation can help us do this, because it gives us time to think, *listen to the person with one ear and with the other ear listen to God. And just...*

**How can we hear God’s voice?** Well, Our time spent with God, reading His word, listening for what the Lord might say to us is critical. For it is in this time spent that we practice and learn to discern His voice. It is out of the overflow of this that ability to discern the same voice when in a conversation comes.

**Point 2: We need to give time and initiative to engaging people in conversation** How can we minister to people if we don’t talk with them? How can we care for people unless we are willing to first listen to them? How can we discover the deeper hindrances to faith that people around us have unless we ask a few good questions, listen carefully, and encourage generously, so we have opportunity to hear their hearts? Sometimes we are so busy with many things... that we fail to give time to people around us.

### **Life Application**

Last week we discussed ‘hearing conversations’ – these being conversations where we ask general questions with the express purpose of listening carefully so as to hear ‘sour notes’ in what others say... because, when we do, through asking questions these can be turned into great opportunities to encourage them toward faith. This week we’re going to discuss in more detail how we could do this, and non-offensively ‘illuminate’ possible discrepancies or contradictions in what they say to them.

To do so it's important that we recognise the key areas of difference that exist between our own worldview as Christians, and the worldview of those around us who are not Christians.

While we believe truth does exist, such as that God is real and can be known, because He has revealed Himself – most people around us do not. If God even exists they believe He is distant, and equally found through any religion, (aka they do NOT believe God has revealed Himself such that He can be known).

While we believe salvation comes by grace through faith (by what God has done in Christ, received through our faith-response) – those around us believe there is no such 'salvation'. Being a good person is what counts – but they have no fixed basis for defining what 'good' is. While we believe God has given us an objective definition of what is right and wrong, people these days see morality as being a 'relative' thing. It follows that, when we share the gospel with them, to them this is no more than 'our version' of the 'truth' - If we 'push' the gospel a bit, they may feel threatened by the exclusiveness of our beliefs.

### **So, how are we to talk with such people?**

You can't tell the truth to a person who doesn't believe truth exists! The best you can do is talk WITH them about it. This is what we're talking about. A conversational approach to evangelism is a method that suits our times. Through the use of questions we can help people to examine their own beliefs, and consider other ways of seeing things- and do this in a way that is non-threatening, which is the point. New Zealanders are still spiritual people –they just don't want to be preached at!

For example, if someone said they believe 'all roads lead to God'

1. What is the 'sour note', what do we see as not making sense in that? While it might seem a nice belief to some, it is actually illogical, as all the religions say very different things in major areas.

2. *But how do you point that out without 'preaching' or confronting them, which would make the conversation uncomfortable?*

You simply ask questions like these three:

1. What do you mean by...?

This seeks to clarify WHAT they believe

2. What led you to that conclusion?

This seeks to clarify WHY they believe that, and

3. Have you considered that...?

This seeks to redirect to, **to illuminate** a different way of thinking.

It would be hard to find a better set of questions to use to open a conversation about a matter on which you have a different point of view to the person you are talking with!

Let's consider two examples:

**1: All religions lead to God** - Sour note / Truth to consider:

1. The religions are actually fundamentally different in what they say about 'God' and also salvation. For example, some religions say there is no God, such as Atheism or one strand of Buddhism which is also atheistic, while others believe in a God. There can't both be a God and not be a God can there?

Another example is, were you aware that the path for salvation is different in the different religions? In Islam it comes by belief in Allah, Muhammad his prophet, and good works. In Hinduism it comes by overcoming karma and incarnations by good works. In Buddhism it comes by getting rid all desires through the eight-fold path. In Christianity it comes as a gift of love, received by faith alone in Christ alone. In nearly every religion our salvation is based in WHAT WE DO, while in Christianity it is UNIQUELY BASED IN WHAT GOD HAS DONE FOR US. Each one of these religions say very different things, so can't all be right.

So a person states, "All religions lead to God". In your listening conversation you begin with the first two general questions that help you to clarify what this person really means rather than trying to assume anything. You ask:

1. What do you mean by that? And 2. What led you to that conclusion? Before you move on to 3. Have you considered ...
  - a. what the religions say about God's existence is different.  
or
  - b. what the religions say about the necessary path for salvation is very different or...
  - c. ... that isn't really logical – I mean all roads don't lead to Rome, right? If you go the wrong way don't you get to the wrong place? And lastly
  - d. ... the claims of the major religious leaders are all really different, I mean...

Buddha claimed to be a teacher who pointed the way.

Mohammad claimed to merely be a prophet. But Jesus claimed to be God come in flesh, to live a sinless life, to die for the sin of the world, and to be the only means for any person living to be forgiven and receive eternal life.

The differences between their claims is significant!

Gergory Koukl put it this way, “*All the religions are essentially the same, except for the area of God and salvation and the problem of man and the afterlife and that kind of stuff. It turns out that on the big issues they are very, very different. They can’t all be true.*”

**Example 2: It doesn’t matter what you believe, so long as it makes you a better/good person** Sour note / Truth to consider:

1. If God turned out to actually exist it *would* matter what you believe (what you believe does matter)
2. God’s definition of ‘better’ and ‘good’ is actually ‘perfect’, so ‘good’ isn’t good enough!

*Possible questions:*

1. What do you mean by better person?
2. What led you to believe beliefs don’t matter?  
Where did you get that definition from?
3. Have you ever considered:
  - a. That there is no fixed definition of what good or ‘better’ is, if there is not one God?  
How do you define what the standard is?
  - b. One of the religions could actually be true?
  - c. What the religions actually say?

**To give perspective to this:**

We can use example, ‘if there is no God there is no value to life – we’re all just meaningless accidents, and no different to any other animal...’ so for instance in killing millions of people Facists, Dictatorships, Communists, and other such regimes actually did nothing wrong. Where as, if there is a God, we’re loved by Him, created special, and therefore life is sacred and of great value.

**So, what we believe does matter, doesn’t it?**

For example, as an atheist or multi-religious person there is actually nothing to stop a person and their community believing that the lives of handicapped children are not as valuable, and just killing them off – which is exactly what regimes lead by the likes of Hitler, the Nazi’s and communist’s have done in the past, and have never apologised for it either. So you could then ask, “Do you think that is right?” And then state “So, what you believe does matter?”

**IN SUMMARY**

Our objective in Christian witness could be put this way: Every day and in every way we help people take one step closer to Jesus.

- That is what these conversations are all about
  - While we must share the gospel with all people
- How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? (Romans 10:14)*

We need to engage in spiritual conversation with people just as Jesus did in our scripture reading's example with Nathanael. We have our three questions:

- *What do you mean by that?*
- *Where did you get that idea from?*
- *Have you considered...?*

So why not try these questions out in a few conversations this week!

**The Material contained in this sermon was made available from Hope Project Media NZ who note that Credits** for the overall direction of this series go to Dr Norm Geisler & Dr David Geisler, from their book 'Conversational Evangelism' (see [meeknessandtruth.org](http://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](http://bigbookpublishing.co.nz).