

THE ART OF CONVERSATION, Pt. 1

A Public Faith Curriculum
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Becoming Conversant

Purpose

Conversation provides an entry point for proclamation, social service and cultural engagement. This lesson will help you become proficient in sharing the gospel (all four chapters) in the vernacular of your profession or a civic group. This is a skill-based article designed to help you move others along in their understanding of Jesus Christ, the world he created and his good news.

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Recommended Reading

The Revolutionary Communicator,
Medefind & Lokkesmoe, Relevant Books, Lake Mary, FL, U.S.A.

Evangelism Made Slightly Less Difficult,
Nick
Pollard, InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL, U.S.A.

Chapter 1 - Conversations of the City

There are numerous conversations going on all around you. Some are private but many are on-going public conversations addressing issues related to business, the economy, financial opportunity, globalization or changes in the fabric of society. Some conversations are whimsical and fun while others deal with heart breaking topics like homelessness, war or child abandonment.

People in every field and profession are engaged in industry related conversations. Scientists are talking about ethics and research; techies are talking about computer viruses and bleeding edge programming. In the arts and media intellectual copyright is a hot topic. The list could go on to include conversations in fashion, business, education, medical and many others industries.

Conversation is integral to who we are and what we do, because we bear God's image and he is a conversationalist. The book of Genesis tells of God speaking creation into existence. "*Then God said*" is repeated eight times in the creation account culminating in, *Then God said, "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness;* (Genesis 1).

God so identifies with spoken words that Jesus, himself is referred to as The Word. He not only brought the message, he was the message. *In the beginning was **the Word**, and **the Word** was with God, and **the Word** was God.* (John 1) There is glory and power of the spoken word!

Before the fall words were used for instruction, collaboration in work and for naming what had been created. God is, by nature, a communicator and words are important in accomplishing his will for the created order. We are also communicators, accomplishing our work, worship and ministry, our *avodah*¹, in part by using language.

But alas, communication is a created structure and as with all structures, communication and words in particular have been corrupted by the fall. Since the fall language has been used to shift blame, accuse, lie and deceive. Psalm 50:19 shows the willfulness of fallen communication, "*You give your mouth free rein for evil, and your tongue frames deceit.*" And James reveals the destructive power of the spoken word. "*Behold, how great a forest is set aflame by such a small fire! And the tongue is a fire, the very world of iniquity; the tongue is set among our members as that which defiles the entire body, and sets on fire the course of our life, and is set on fire by hell...no one can tame the tongue; it is a restless evil and full of deadly poison.*" (James 3)

In several passages, the Book of Proverbs contrast the fallen and redemptive direction that words can take. Proverbs 12: 18, says, "*There is one whose rash words are like sword thrusts, but the tongue of the wise brings healing.*"

Communication can be redemptive; wisdom, kindness and justice are just some of the redeeming acts attributed to the tongue. Psalm 37:30, "*The mouth of the righteous utters wisdom, and his tongue speaks justice.*" And Proverbs 31:26, "*She opens her mouth with wisdom, and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue.*

¹ *Avodah* is a Hebrew word meaning work, worship, ministry and service. For a more complete understanding of *avodah* see *The Kingdom Story* or *The Nature of Ministry*.

What do you think of when you imagine the highest notion and greatest aspiration for communication? It might be the relational aspect of communication that comes to your mind. Communication is not simply transmitting information but relating. In 1 Corinthians 1:9 we see that God *calls* us into fellowship with his Son. He isn't giving us information but an invitation.

In *The Revolutionary Communicator*, Medefind and Lokkesmoe trace the meaning of the word communication by looking at the root word "*com*" used in such words as communication, community, compassion, and communion. The Latin prefix "*com*" means together, originally *communication* meant to "share together."ⁱ

When we communicate do we seek to share together? Is there any sense of community in our communication? Medefind and Lokkesmoe go on to say that, "Today we define communication as the transmission and reception of information."ⁱⁱ Communication has come to mean simply downloading information. This can happen via the Internet or the television where nothing personal or shared takes place. But downloading information can happen in conversation as well.

Medefind and Lokkesmoe conclude that, "The work of coming near for the sake of connection is the true foundation of all fruitful communication."ⁱⁱⁱ It's through this kind of connection with others that you will be able to enter the lives of those around you and influence them for the kingdom.

When we seek to represent Christ to the world we need to approach relationships with a generous others centeredness. We need to resist the temptation to move people along on our time schedule or to love them only as long as we think they may become a Christian. We are to love as Christ loves, which means unconditionally, willing to understand as well as wanting to be understood.

As a result, our objective in conversation is relational. Conversation has a give and take aspect to it, which includes both listening and speaking. When communicating the gospel we want to help our friends make discoveries about the world they live in and about Jesus Christ, *but* we also want to take interest in their thoughts and ideas. We want to help our friends discover the loving God that is calling them into fellowship. And so our conversations become a means for others to hear God's voice.

When presenting our ideas we want to lead others in the process of discovering truth. This can reshape how we approach conversation. Let's consider the effectiveness of "downloaded" information verses the process of personal discovery. Which of these styles is more likely to lead to real life change?

First, what does it mean to download information in a conversation? Like the Internet a conversational download is an impersonal presentation of information. It is a one-sided conversation that leaves no room for questioning, processing or thinking. In these situations the speaker dominates the conversation and seeks to learn little about you. They have something to say and they want you to hear it, regardless of your interest.

These are not the kind of conversations we want to have. We want to engage people rather than talking at them. We tend to keep ideas that are forced on us at a distance, whereas insights that we gain through reflective thought tend to sink in deeply and take root in our belief system. This is why Medefind and Lokkesmoe say, "self-

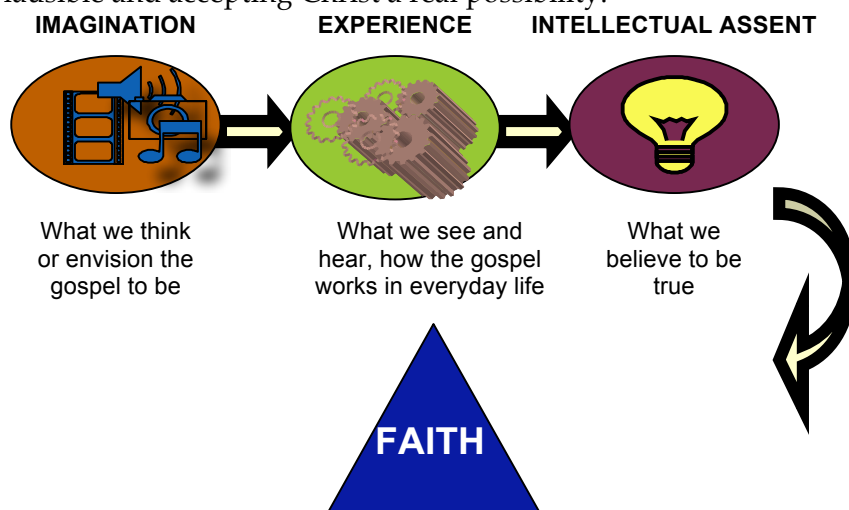
discovered truths are always far more powerful and enduring than those that are imposed or spoon-fed. They inevitably penetrate deeper, reside longer, and influence more thoroughly. Often, they will continue to impact for a lifetime.”^{iv}

The Process of Coming to Faith - There is a natural process that a person goes through when coming to faith. Conversation is one means by which we can move people through the process. We can lead others in discovery when we challenge ideas, motivate for action, help build frameworks for newly considered truths and move people toward becoming dissatisfied with current beliefs. All this helps move them toward the truths held out in Jesus Christ. In *Evangelism Made Slightly Less Difficult*, Nick Pollard states that, “If we truly care about people, wanting to help them not just come to faith for a while but also to go on and grow as Christians, we must encourage them to think through the ideas they are picking up.”^v

If we don’t give people the time needed to process our message we ask them to commit their life to something before they know that it is true. They may seem to make a decision but change their minds just as quickly. On the other hand if we give people the opportunity to become convinced of the worthiness of the gospel and eventually of the truth of the gospel they will move from imagination (what they envision the gospel to be) to experience (seeing the gospel played out in their lives) and then to intellectual assent (what they believe to be true). People rarely move from facts, to experience and then to imagination because we need to experience the truth before we can know it intellectually.

Consider how we fall in love. When we are attracted to another person we begin to imagine what it would be like to have that person as a boyfriend or girlfriend, maybe even what it would be like to be married to that person. Once we have a picture of what we think life with this person will be like, we have the impetus to enter into a dating relationship. Our imagination opens the door for our experience. Once we are in the relationship we begin to experience the truth of the relationship in the real world. If that experience is all we had hoped for, we move from experience to intellectual assent, agreeing that this relationship is good. Once we agree intellectually we are ready to decide whether or not we want to make a commitment, in this case to marriage.

Coming to faith works much the same way. Through conversation, life experiences or Bible teaching we begin to imagine what life as a Christian might be. If what we imagine seems good we may be motivated to see and hear more about the faith, wanting to experience it, test it to see if it is real. We may want to observe Christians first hand. If what we see seems good and there is authenticity, then faith or belief becomes plausible and accepting Christ a real possibility.



When our communication engages the imagination, provides rich experiences and satisfies the intellect we have a far greater chance of communicating the truths of the gospel. All this can happen in the context of conversation, but rarely in the context of one conversation. As a result, gospel presentations are like snowflakes, no two are exactly alike. When you consider biblical examples of proclamation, both Jesus as well as the apostles talked with people in varied approaches that seemed to be tailor made for each person.

When we view evangelism as a process and clusters of conversation as a means to discuss and move through the process, we are freed up to tailor make each gospel presentation.

Our lives provide that context for our words. In the Gospel of John we see that Jesus *was* the message. Both his words and his life communicated “the light” or truth of God. The words of Saint Francis of Assisi, “Preach the gospel at all times and when necessary use words.” underscore the relevance of our lives to the message we speak. We have a great message but our words alone may not be able to convey that message. Many people will need to *see it lived* before our *words* will make any sense to them. We are the *visible representatives of the kingdom*, so that people can see and understand the unseen or *invisible kingdom*.

Living the kingdom life is a prerequisite to speaking kingdom words and is the best entrée into life-changing conversations. When we imitate Christ our lives will either make sense intuitively to those around us *or* be so counter-intuitive that we will have openings for meaningful conversations. Nick Pollard says, “We need to demonstrate the love and power of Jesus in our lives as well as in our words. But we also need to be able to help people think again about the ideas and beliefs they have picked up.”^{vi} This is why neither our words nor our actions stand-alone and so along with living well we must learn to speak well, mastering the art of conversation.

Chapter 2 - Becoming Conversant

Understanding the conversation and having something to say

To be conversant about a given topic means that you understand the topic being discussed and the progress of the conversation. As a result you may have something to say. Becoming conversant is essential. If you want to be able to talk about Jesus in the vernacular of your profession, you need to know your profession. Of course you need to know what Jesus has to say as well.

When we talk about becoming conversant we are not asking people to stop talking about what is important to them and join our conversation. *We* are joining *their conversation*. We are listening and we are talking. We are always humbly learning. At times we are asking questions to better understand the topic and how it is viewed among our peers. At other times we ask questions to respectfully provoke thought.

The point is to speak into the on-going conversations in our work place, to engage in the hot topics of the day and help others see what Jesus has to say about those subjects. First you need to understand that Jesus has far more to say to the world than you might realize. Here are four skills to help you become conversant about your work, leisure or civic activities, understanding both the conversation and what Jesus brings to it.

Skill #1: Assessing the Conversation

Identifying the four Chapters of the Gospel by using the *Ought, Is, Can, Will* framework

People all around you are talking about the world they live in and whether they know it or not they are talking about the Kingdom Story. You might be thinking, "Hold on there, I've never heard anyone saying anything about creation, fall or redemption at my office." You might even think that the only way your colleagues will ever talk about the Story is if you break into the conversation and change the subject. In reality, people are already talking about the gospel.

What ought to be, what is, what can be and what will be are verbal clues into the conversations of your colleagues. You can enter a discussion when you hear these statements and know right away what part of the Kingdom Story is being talked about.

Take for instance a story reported in a Chinese newspaper about the national mining industry. The article reported that China accounts for 80% of the world's mining deaths but only produces 35% of the world's coal. It went on to say that for every 100 tons of coal mined; China has 100 times as many accident related deaths as the United States does for the same amount of coal. In the first nine months of this year (2004) 4153 miners were killed in work related accidents. A mine safety expert told the China Daily that the poor safety conditions in Chinese mines is due to a lack of automation, poor equipment, unskilled workers and low spending on technologies.

Because of the high level of media coverage of these recent mining accidents it isn't hard to imagine that people in China were talking about this issue at the office or over lunch. Imagine what a conversation might be like among co-workers who were talking about this article:

You would probably hear shocked responses to the high death rates in the mines. It might be said that, "Chinese mines ought to be as safe as mines elsewhere in the world." People would lament the loss of life and be angry about the poor conditions, perhaps saying something like, "This is so terrible, it is so sad." As the conversation progresses you might hear about what could be, "China can do better than this! If the money and time were put into it, Chinese mines can be made safe." And as the chat winds down, people would nod their heads in agreement, "I hope someday things will be different."

Let's examine the language of our fictitious conversation using the framework. Is there anything absurd that you can't imagine being said? Probably not, but how is the kingdom mentioned in this conversation?

Mines ought to be safe. Whenever you hear the terms "ought to be" or "ought not to be" you are hearing a reference to the Creation chapter of our story. Ought refers to creational structures as they are meant to be.

This is terrible, this is sad. This kind of statement refers to the chapter in our story about the fall. Whenever you hear people lament the way things are they are talking about a creational structure that has been corrupted. In this case the mining industry fits into the creational structure for energy. Creation calls for energy supplies that are clean and safe, but because of the fall that's not how things are.

China *can do* better. What things “can be” reflect redemption, because we are thinking about bringing the corrupted structure back into alignment with God’s intention.

The *hope of someday*, reveals that the human heart longs for something better. We long for the time of final restoration when all will be put right in the world.

Skill #2: Assessing the Context

Determining structure and direction in conversation to make gospel-sense of the conversations around you

Once you understand which chapters of the gospel are being discussed you can use the concept of *structure* and *direction* (discussed in *The Nature of Ministry*) to analyze the topic in light of Christ’s redemptive purposes.

When we understand what creational structures are involved and in what direction they are moving (either toward further corruption or back toward God’s design) in a given situation, then we will know how to proceed in the discussion. For more information on *structure* and *direction* please refer to *The Nature of Ministry* or *Creation Regained*.

There are three basic questions to ask about *structure* and *direction*:

- What creational structures are involved in the discussion? There may be more than one. This touches on the creation/ought chapter of our story. *Appendix# 1 - Creational Structures*
- Which direction is the structure moving in, and why? Is a corrupted or redemptive direction evident for the given structure? Here you are discerning between the *fall/is* chapter and the *redemption/can* chapter of our story.
- If a fallen direction is apparent what can be done to change the direction to one of redemption? Or how can this structure be brought back into God’s intended path?

In this part of the conversation you are looking to discover how others view a given situation. Are they surprised by the fallen condition of the world? Can they explain why the world is the way it is? Are they part of the problem or part of the solution? How far are your friends willing to go in defining the problem? Where do they place responsibility?

You also want to provoke thought with questions designed to illuminate the patterns seen in the world. What parts of the Kingdom Story are intuitive? Which parts are counter-intuitive? You may want to present kingdom values and see how they are received.

Western culture is becoming alienated from the moral and ethical underpinnings that once supported our public life. As a result if you live in the west your co-workers may be hesitant to talk about anything that comes close to the topic of sin or even personal responsibility. In conversation you can probe and find out what and how they get around these issues or how they explain the good we see in the world.

Skill #3: Assessing the Heart Response.

When considering a person's heart response to a given situation we are seeking to understand how they are interacting in a real life experience with The Kingdom Story, not on an intellectual basis but on an emotional and empathetic basis.

Empathy helps us connect truth to the broader world; what is good for me is probably good for you. It provides the motivation to do unto others, as you would have them do unto you. Therefore understanding how an individual is interacting emotionally with a given situation will allow you to help him/her think about the truths of the gospel on a wider scale.

Identifying emotions and linking them to the correct part of the Story, will help you discern which way to take a conversation. There are five basic questions to help you understand how your friends and colleagues are interacting with the world around them.

1. *What are the emotions expressed about the given situation?* There could be a wide range of emotions depending on what part of the story you are discussing, including anger, humiliation, grief, pride and jealousy.

In helping a friend identify and connect emotions to given parts of the story, you will help them begin to see that they are already quite naturally agreeing with the truth of that part of the story. This questioning and identification process also leads to the next three questions.

2. *What is the human heart longing for?* Heart longings are as vast and varied as the emotions that trigger them. Common longings include: love, justice, recognition, mercy, revenge, forgiveness and a host of other things.

3. *What is the person's gut reaction to the situation?* We may deny the existence of truth but the intuitive side of our personalities knows better. We naturally cry out at injustice and applaud righteousness. Although our consciences are fallen and they will not always assess a situation correctly, finding out what seems right to a person will help you understand them better, if only to see the fallen-ness of their conscience.

4. *How will his/her character be affected by different choices of thought and action?* The choices that we make as we go through life shapes who we are and who we are becoming. Each offense makes it easier to offend again and on a greater level. Small lies lead to bigger lies and cheating or stealing a little will corrupt the conscience and lead to worse offenses. On the other hand each good choice makes the next good choice easier. In helping a friend consider the effect of their actions we are helping them to imagine two different futures and to choose between them.

5. *What does the redeeming love of Jesus have to say to the situation?* In any given situation there will be things that the Word of God will affirm and things that it will condemn. God's love and holiness call for justice, truth and mercy. The Lord stands against hatred, humiliation and greed.

Skill #4: Assessing Underlying Beliefs

Everyone, whether they know it or not has a worldview, a system of thought that seeks to make sense of the world they live in. And all worldviews attempt to answer three questions; what is the purpose or meaning of life, what is wrong with the world we live in and how can we fix it. The Christian worldview answers those questions through the Kingdom Story, creation, fall, redemption and consummation.

How do you begin to assess the worldview or beliefs of another person? Especially beliefs that are not necessarily on the surface level of their life but may be buried deep within the subconscious? What is the basic belief underlying an individual's statements or actions? What parts are true? What parts need to be challenged? In assessing a belief we ask whether or not it is consistent with reality? Does it make sense? Does it work?

In *Evangelism Made Slightly Less Difficult*, Nick Pollard describes a process called Positive Deconstruction^{vii}. The point of the process is to help people see the inconsistencies and un-truths of their underlying beliefs. Once uncomfortable with their belief system many people become open to considering new truths and are thus more open to the gospel. The following five-step process has been adapted from Pollard's work. What this process will do is help your friends think clearly about what they believe and if needed provide them incentive to let go of beliefs that are not true.

This five-step process for assessing underlying beliefs can help you begin to understand the thoughts and convictions that are being expressed by a friend or colleague. It is important to note however that this doesn't make you a mind reader or psychologist, because apart from your friends confirming your insights you will only be making assumptions.

1. *Observation.* What actions and words give clues of deep feelings or convictions? What actions and words give clues to a lack of feeling or conviction? Can you see any inconsistencies between words and actions?

Visible behavior and audible words lie on the surface of our lives giving clues to what is going on at a deeper level. We rarely think about our underlying beliefs, nevertheless they shape our lives and direct our actions. However because we don't often think deeply about our underlying beliefs these beliefs can be quite incongruent with one another.

You are looking for inconsistencies as well as consistencies. People often choose their belief system in order to condone their behavior. For instance a person may accept a certain belief about sexual behavior because of how they choose to live, rather than thinking through the issue, deciding rationally what they believe and then having to either choose to live according to their beliefs or to choose to live with the known contradiction between their beliefs and their lifestyle. In today's society, we often see the same person holds conflicting beliefs with equal conviction. This can only be done comfortably when beliefs are not highly scrutinized. Your objective is to help your friends think through their beliefs so that they become uncomfortable with them.

2. *Question.* It would be wrong to assume that just because you have observed a tendency in a friend that you understand what a certain behavior really means. As you make observations you will need to clarify the meaning by asking questions such as, "What do you mean? Do I understand you to say...? Why do you think...? Is that important to you? Why?" Questions are also a good means of helping your friend clarify what they really think and believe.

3. *Assessing beliefs.* Once you understand what another person believes you want to find out what parts of their beliefs are true and which are false. There are three rules of logic that will help you determine if something is true: Truth makes sense, it corresponds to reality and it works.

Does it make sense? Something cannot be true if it contains logical inconsistencies.

Does it correspond to reality? Truth properly describes the real world and doesn't make claims inconsistent with reality.

Does it work? Truth enables us to function where as error does not. (Not everything that works is right, i.e. bribery may get you what you want, it may work but it is still sin.)

The very questions you ask yourself to determine if something is true can be asked to help your friend see false aspects of a belief. "That's interesting, but how does it work?" "I can see you have thought about this but how does your belief work in the real world?" "I think I understand what you are saying but have you considered this inconsistency?"

4. *Affirm what is true.* Everybody gets part of the story right. Don't be afraid to encourage and affirm those things that the person with whom you are speaking get right. Use beliefs that are true as a springboard to challenge those beliefs that are not true. For instance if a person were to say that they love children but don't believe that there is an inherent value in life, you could springboard from love to its natural conclusion: value.

5. *Challenge what is false.* The first rule of challenging false beliefs is to always be humble. We as believers will not always be right. God's truth is absolute but our ability to understand it is not. However, with humility, don't be afraid to gently challenge wrong beliefs. You may say something like, "Have you considered...?" "Can you see the inconsistency in what you are saying?" Your objective in challenging those ideas that are not based in truth is to help your friend think through what he really believes. This is not a time to get in an argument or to try to prove you're right.

Conclusion

Conversation is an art. It is something that people who effectively influence others will all eventually master. This article provides an approach to beginning the process of becoming both conversant. Take the four skills laid out here and begin to develop your conversational abilities. As Susan Scott says in her masterful book, *Fierce Conversations* "Our work, our relationships, and in fact, our very lives succeed or fail gradually, then suddenly, one conversation at a time. No one has to

change, but everyone has to have the conversation."^{viii} Determine to become skilled at calling those around you into a conversation about life.

ⁱ Medefind & Lokkesmoe, *The Revolutionary Communicator*, Relevant Books, Lake Mary, FL, U.S.A., page 26

ⁱⁱ *ibid*

ⁱⁱⁱ *ibid*

^{iv} *The Revolutionary Communicator*, page 66

^v Nick Pollard, *Evangelism Made Slightly Less Difficult*, InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL, U.S.A., page 90

^{vi} *Evangelism Made Slightly Less Difficult*, page 31

^{vii} *Evangelism Made Slightly Less Difficult*, page 48

^{viii} Susan Scott, *Fierce Conversations*, page 1