

THE ART OF CONVERSATION, Pt. 2

A Public Faith Curriculum
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THE ART OF CONVERSATION, Pt. 2

Becoming Conversational

Purpose

The Art of Conversation, pt. 1 discussed what it means to be conversant about a given topic, specifically ones profession. This article, The Art of Conversation, pt. 2, covers what it means to be conversational.

Once you know what is being talked about and how it relates to our story you may need to improve your conversational skills. Whereas being conversant is a matter of understanding the conversation and having something to contribute, being conversational is being able to enter into the conversation and make your contributions.

Becoming Conversational

- Skill #1 Listening
- Skill #3 Asking Questions
- Skill #4 Telling Stories

Recommended Reading

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

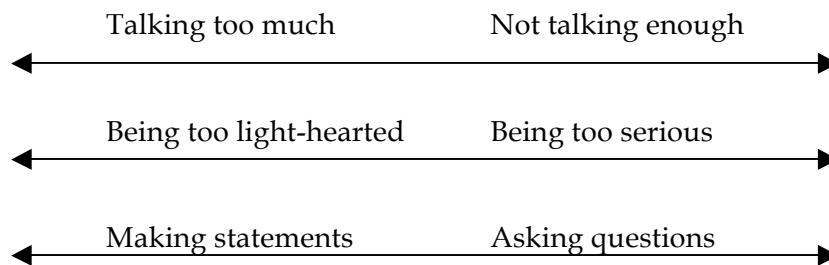
Evangelism Made Slightly Less Difficult,
Nick Pollard, InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL, U.S.A.

Becoming Conversational

Contributing to the conversation

Once you know what is being talked about and how it relates to our story you may need to improve your conversational skills. Whereas being conversant is a matter of understanding the conversation and having something to contribute, being conversational is being able to enter into the conversation and make your contributions.

Conversation, or “coming together to share” is an activity in which two or more people engage. It is therefore an activity that has to hold a certain balance to be mutually acceptable and beneficial. There are certain tensions in conversation that you must be aware of, not only so you can strike the right balance but also so you can know when it is appropriate to allow the conversation to move to one end of the spectrum. The three tension points in conversations that you need to consider are:



How much should you talk? For a conversation to be truly a shared experience there usually needs to be an even flow of back-and-forth discourse. You should be listening as much as you are talking and vice versa. If you are talking too much, chances are you have placed the focus of the conversation solely on yourself. If you are not talking enough you run the risk of frustrating other people. Conversation involves some degree of vulnerability, if you are too quiet you are allowing the other person to take all the risk and do all the work.

What tone should I set, serious or light-hearted? Once again there is a need for balance in most conversation, but it isn't always an equal balance. Light-heartedness can be used in many ways throughout a conversation. Humor makes a great transition as subjects are being changed, it can be used to build rapport, or to ease the tension when the conversation takes on a hostile tone. Light-heartedness can be fun but it can be overdone. Most good conversations will not stay on the surface but go deeper into life experience. You will be discussing feelings, hope, thoughts and opinions. Humor misused can distract from these types of life-changing discourse. However, if you never use humor in your conversations you run the risk of overpowering or boring your friends.

Making statements or asking questions? Here too, there is a tension or balance that you need to find in your conversations. Statements tend to reveal your thoughts, feelings and opinions. Without making statements in a conversation others would learn little of you. But questions are ideal for switching the focus from you to others, allowing them to share their thoughts and feelings. A good conversationalist will strive to be others-centered and in so doing be willing to both share and receive input, learning as well as teaching.

A good conversation will be multi-faceted with varying levels of intimacy. As you get to know others it becomes important to move into deeper levels of conversation. At various times you will need to know how to engage in small talk, sharing opinions, sharing feelings, and articulating ideas, thoughts and questions. Each of these levels of communication requires progressively more openness from both the speaker and the listener.

With the kind of conversations we are talking about, conversations that are challenging long held assumptions and life values it might be easy to assume you do not need to know how to engage in small talk. Small talk has three main functions and plays an important role in most conversations. 1. Small talk allows people to get comfortable with you before you dive into more substantive topics. 2. Small talk allows you to learn about the person you are conversing with; their interest, frustrations, what kind of day they have had, what kind of person they are, etc. 3. Small talk is helpful during transitional periods of a conversation, i.e. at the beginning of a conversation or at the end.

How can we help lead people to meaningful insights about life? There are three components of conversation or conversational skills that will allow you to help your audience process the ideas you are presenting: *listening* (or attentiveness), *question asking*, and *story telling*.

Skill #1 Listening

Listening is one of those skills that we as believers have been sadly remiss in developing, especially when it comes to listening to those who are not of our faith. I can't help wondering if the reason for this is that we don't think we have anything to learn from the non-believing world. Thus we blunder into a conversation that doesn't really interest us and blurt out the facts of the gospel. When our words are discounted we assume that God is somehow responsible for not preparing the hearts of our listeners.

In Colossians 4:6, Paul makes it clear that how we deliver our message matters, and in part determines how our listeners respond to our message. *"Let your speech always be with grace, seasoned, as it were, with salt, so that you may know how you should respond to each person."*

This admonition is in the midst of a discussion about gospel-proclamation; looking at the greater context of the verse, note that proclamation is linked to conduct. In other words, what we say together with how we live are the medium for our message.

*Devote yourselves to prayer, keeping alert in it with an attitude of thanksgiving; praying at the same time for us as well, that God may open up to us a door for the word, so that we may **speak forth** the mystery of Christ, for which I have also been imprisoned; in order that I may make it clear in the way I ought to **speak**. **Conduct** yourselves with wisdom toward outsiders, making the most of the opportunity. **Let your speech** always be with grace, seasoned, as it were, with salt, so that you may know how you should respond to each person.*
Colossians 4:2-6

Listening well is the key to "speech that is seasoned with salt."

How to listen well. In describing a good listener we want to expand our understanding to include more than hearing and understanding. We want our listening to include seeing and feeling, noticing and responding. When we seek to listen to another person we are being attentive to that person.

Medefind and Lokkesmoe say that, "Attentiveness served as a wellspring of Jesus' communication. Always active, always thorough. Listening and noting, picking out and discerning, observing and questioning, seeking and even feeling."ⁱ

It is attentiveness that will guide you as you seek to communicate. Attentiveness allows you to understand not just the speaker but also the environment and immediate situation surrounding the speaker. As you pay attention to what and how something is being said you will be better able to give a loving response that considers the thoughts and feelings of the person with whom you are speaking.

Your listening, or attentiveness should take into account both verbal and non-verbal messages. Is the other person bored or uncomfortable with the topic being discussed? Do they understand, agree, or disagree? Many times people will not openly state their opinions but the truth is apparent to all who are willing to attend. It is this kind of listening that will help you know what to say or do or what *not* to say or do in any given situation.

Conversation is not a battle to be won or lost. Your goal is not to convince but to gently provoke and challenge previously held assumptions. The seeds of skillful conversations will take root deep in the lives of the people you seek to influence, bearing fruit, albeit not always immediately. Listening with real interest and concern are the most non-aggressive ways to engage in conversation.

How can we cultivate good listening skills? "It is more than a skill. Jesus' attentiveness was a discipline, an intentional concentrating of the senses."ⁱⁱ Listening really is a discipline, being attentive is an act of determination that begins with the question, Do I really care about the people with whom I engage in conversation? Am I willing to probe the thoughts and feelings of others or am I simply looking for someone to hear what I think and how I feel?

Apart from sincere concern for others our conversations will be contrived and manipulative. Our concern, and even our ability to be concerned will spring from our relationship with Jesus. Knowing that God has attended to the needs of our heart through his communication to us will go a long way in freeing us from seeking to have our own needs met in every conversation in which we engage. Our attentiveness is made possible by the peace found in Christ alone.

The key to attentiveness and listening well is a quiet heart and a still mind because listening requires waiting for the other person to express him/herself. It is impossible to pay attention if your heart and mind are on other topics like working up a response to the speaker or getting the waitress's attention. You will not notice the tone of voice much less facial expressions if while listening your attention is focused elsewhere. A good listener must employ a disciplined focus that comes from a still heart. One of the best ways to cultivate this discipline is to practice the spiritual disciplines of silence and solitude.¹

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In the Spirit of the Disciplines, Dallas Willard has much to say about the practice of silence as a discipline. He suggests that in this practice we gain control over our tongues as we learn to create an inner distance between our thoughts and words. In relating the discipline of silence to conversations about faith, Willard says, "...talking is frequently overemphasized...Silence and especially true listening are often the strongest testimony of our faith."ⁱⁱⁱ

It is important to realize that paying attention to others has a cost. Listening well isn't always quick and therefore not always efficient when you want to get things done. Listening well means depriving yourself of opportunities for self-expression. Listening well means that since you can't always determine when someone else wants to speak, that an unwanted interruption may need to become the priority of the moment. Listening well can at times be quite inconvenient.

Skill # 2: Asking Questions

Nothing thrills quite like discovery: the more desirous the find and the longer the search, the greater the thrill will be. And nothing haunts quite like the unanswered question. The closer a question comes to touching the meaning of life the greater the haunting.

"Once the question mark has arisen in the human brain the answer must be found, if it takes a hundred years. A thousand years." Jules Verne, *Journey to the Center of the Earth*.

The value of the simple question has been known for centuries. Socrates' great teaching method was based on its use, Jesus relied heavily on the question during his brief, world-shaking ministry and the human spirit will embark on a life-long quest at its asking.

Asking good questions can do what downloading information can never do - lead others in the process of self-discovery. There is nothing that challenges and then shatters the status quo quite like the question, revealing false perceptions and opening the listener to new possibilities. Information alone leaves the human heart little changed. But as our minds begin to grapple with new possibilities our imaginations are ignited and we begin to become uncomfortable with the way things have always been. All this comes into play as we begin to question.

Do you have a cultural bias? Although the question is a powerful tool in motivating, challenging and teaching, it is not viewed equally in all cultures. In China the question has not been exalted to the degree it has been in the West. A quick comparison of the Confucian method of teaching with the Socratic method will illustrate the point.

Socrates and Confucius were near contemporaries, Socrates being born within a decade of Confucius' death. Both were teachers who used discussion as a means of

¹ For more information on the spiritual disciplines See *Spirit of the Disciplines* by Dallas Willard, Richard Foster's *Celebration of Discipline*, or other references on practicing the spiritual disciplines.

communicating. Both believed in self-discovery. Both left an historical legacy like few others in the world.

The Socratic teaching method, which is still very popular in the West, is based on repeated questioning to elicit truths assumed to be implicit in all rational beings. The teacher asks the questions and the students grapple with subject and come up with their answers.

Confucius used a different method, which is evident in so many sayings of Confucius, "A student asked...the master said..." In this method the students ask the questions and the master answers authoritatively from his knowledge base.

Ancient literature from the East and West also show the cultural bias toward the question as a tool for learning. In *The Art of War*, Sun Tzu asks just three questions. Those commenting on Sun Tzu's statements ask 14 more questions for a total of 17 questions. In the book of Proverbs from the Bible, slightly shorter than *The Art of War*, the authors ask 46 questions, more than three times as many as in *The Art of War*.

But in what literature do we find the most questions? The gospels. In nearly 2000 verses of dialogue, Jesus asks more than 150 questions. Admittedly Jesus' recorded discourse is almost twice as long as *The Art of War* but it has nearly ten times as many questions. "The Gospels, which record only a fraction of all Jesus said and did, contain more than one hundred fifty questions asked by Jesus. That's not exactly what you would expect from someone who claimed to be the answer."^{iv} Jesus was willing to relinquish control of the educational process to best meet the needs of those he was trying to reach.

The Revolutionary Communicator points out that Jesus used questions to, "test faith, gently rebuke, explore the disciples' understanding of Jesus, and invite them to examine what they truly value."^v *What are some additional benefits to asking questions rather than making statements?*

- A good question can change the focus and the direction of a conversation. This can be particularly helpful if you are dominating the discussion. Every time you ask a question you shift the focus from yourself to the other person. In a group the question can be used to shift the focus from anyone who happens to be dominating the conversation or can help draw a quieter or more hesitant person into the conversation.
- Questions slow the conversation down and give people time to think, letting them consider the topic and form thoughts and opinions.
- Questions can provide natural transitions when the subject needs to be changed.
- Questions give up control of the conversation to others.
- By asking questions, we honor the listener.
- Questions can help others, "Scrutinize life from unexpected vantage points, rethink deeply rooted assumptions, and probe unexamined motives and values."^{vi}

Questions can perform several functions in conversation including ignite the imagination, provoke thought, reveal the heart, challenge assumptions and call to action.

By asking good questions you can help people reconsider long held assumptions. You help them see the inconsistencies between what they say they believe and what they cherish, their core values. Well thought through questions cause people to ask themselves the deeper more basic questions of life, "What do I think?" "What do I value?" "What will I do?" "What do I really want?"

Medefind & Lokkesmoe make it clear that, "At the heart of Jesus' questions was a simple, driving purpose: *to prepare*. Effective communication can prepare your listeners. It removes obstacles, erects some signposts, and hands them a compass."^{vii}

Skill #3: Telling Stories

The Middle-Eastern monarch slouched, restless in his throne. He seemed to sense the rumors, buzzing like flies over dung in the spring air. It was whispered that the king, despite his reputation for justice and goodness, had taken the wife of a faithful soldier and then ordered the man murdered before he could discover the offense. Whether or not the courtiers believed it, not one would dare breathe the accusation in the king's presence.

The throne room fell silent as an old man with a ragged beard hobbled up its steps, the revered prophet Nathan. Normally welcoming, the king's eyes narrowed, and his jaw tightened. But as the wizened prophet transitioned from his respectful greeting into a simple narrative, relief washed over the room.

"There was a peasant who owned a single ewe lamb," began Nathan. "This lamb was a pet to him and his children. It shared his food, drank from his cup, and even slept in his arms. He loved it like a daughter.

"Nearby lived a rich landholder, wealthy beyond measure. He owned vast lands pasturing countless sheep. But when a visitor arrived at his estate, the rich man did the unthinkable. Rather than use a sheep from his own fields, he directed his servants to go and steal the peasant's precious lamb, then prepare it for his guest."

The king rose from his chair, enraged. "How dare that wealthy man do such a thing? He deserves to die!"

The old prophet looked the king squarely in the eye, his voice firm. "You are that man."

The air quivered for a moment, tense as a straining bow. Then the king crumpled back into his throne, and let out a long weary breath. The message had struck its mark.

You may have recognized this story about King David, re-told by Medefind and Lokkesmoe.^{viii} It is interesting to consider that the prophet Nathan chose to tell a story when confronting David about his sin. He didn't lecture or quote Bible verses, because those types of communication would never pierce the heart like good story. Why?

Unlike the question, stories seem to have a universal appeal that spans most every culture. If you were to take a sampling of the wisdom of China throughout the ages, it would be mainly composed of stories not simply propositional truths. The story has been employed as a teaching method in other cultures as well. Consider the Aesop's Fables, more than a hundred short stories, each teaching a moral.

When considering the value of the story we need look only as far as the gospels. These life accounts of Jesus record only one sermon but dozens of parables that Jesus used to teach his followers.

There are many reasons why the story is so effective in communicating, especially if you consider your objective is life-change not simply passing on information. Stories have a universal appeal; people everywhere love them. With a well told story you can pretty much guarantee that you will be listened to, something that is far from certain with other kinds of communication.

1. *When people experience truth at an intuitive, empathetic or imaginative level it can make it easier to know that truth intellectually.* By engaging the imagination a story can allow people to experience truth vicariously, preparing the way for intellectual assent.

2. *Stories can help make abstract truth easier to grasp.* Consider Jesus' many parables; he always used things from everyday life to explain the more abstract principals of the kingdom of God. Soil was used to explain the condition of the human heart. He talked about bread and water, lost coins and lost sheep. He talked about treasure and empty fields. Medefind and Lokkesmoe describe Jesus' teaching; "Never did he (Jesus) refer to vague truths or general principles without immediately connecting them to something in the real world of action and objects."^{ix} How can you explain the biblical concepts of truth or justice, much less of love? You can't! Propositional truth can never help the human heart know what love looks like, but a well-told story can. If a concept is abstract it will most likely be meaningless to your audience.

3. *Stories provide a framework for interpreting new information.* We all have internal frameworks that allow us to interpret the circumstances of our lives, as well as our intellectual and emotional response to those circumstances. If we simply give people new information without helping them build a new framework our words will have little effect. The new ideas don't fit with the old way of thinking. One way to help people build frameworks for new thoughts and ideas is by telling stories. According to Medefind and Lokkesmoe, "A mere fact-giver delivers new information, but ultimately remains at the mercy of the receiver's processing. The storyteller provides not only new information, but also offers a compelling framework for how that information can be integrated into the listener's life."^x

4. *A Story can open the door for unpalatable truth.* Consider the prophet Nathan; he was able to confront David with the most unwanted truth by telling a story. "We all have issues we don't want to confront. We hold views and opinions we don't want to have challenged. As a result, communication that asks us to make anything but the most superficial changes is greatly unwelcome to the human psyche. The trouble is, communication often involves just that - requesting change, or expressing truths that can disturb comfortable habits and assumptions."^{xi}

You may be asking how you can begin your entry into story telling. Which stories will you tell? Plan to begin slowly, building up your repertoire as you go. Initially consider

using stories from the Bible, repackaging them for a modern audience. You may want to begin to read the newspaper collecting stories that illustrate the things you want to communicate. Make note of the types of issues that come up in your conversations and look for good illustrations. Initially try using a story as a conversation opener, and then you won't need to come up with an appropriate one on the spot. This also allows you to give initial direction to the conversation. You might want to begin looking for good strong stories to explain abstract truths such as love, justice, truth and holiness.

Learning to tell a story well is not hard it simply takes practice. There are a few things that will help. If you want your stories to have a certain punch, to be entertaining and yet to make a point, you need to keep a few things in mind:^{xii}

1. A good story doesn't ramble. Cut out all the extra details that don't pertain to the point.
2. A good story helps people "see" or imagine what is being told. To do this you need to keep in all the important details. Ask yourself if the particular information is part of the main story or really part of a second story, one that may not need to be told.
3. Describe the situation using words that express more than just what happened. Tell how it happened and how it felt.
4. Try to build suspense so that the final point causes your listeners to stop and pause and think.
5. A good story grips both the heart and the mind.

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 conversational. Take the 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."^{xiii} Determine to become skilled at calling those around you into a conversation about life.

ⁱ *Revolutionary Communicator*, page 8

ⁱⁱ *Revolutionary Communicator*, page 7

ⁱⁱⁱ Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, Harper Collins, 1991, San Francisco, page 164

^{iv} *Revolutionary Communicator*, page 55

^v *Revolutionary Communicator*, page 55

^{vi} *Revolutionary Communicator*

^{vii} *Revolutionary Communicator*, page 56

^{viii} *Revolutionary Communicator*, page 100

^{ix} *Revolutionary Communicator*, page 106

^x *Revolutionary Communicator*, page 103

^{xi} *Revolutionary Communicator*, page 101

^{xii} Adapted from *Revolutionary Communicator*, chapter 5

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