

## How to Turn a Conversation to Spiritual Things

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Moving a conversation around to spiritual things can be the most difficult part of witnessing. We can talk freely with our friends about many subjects, but are at a loss when we want to bridge the gap between everyday life and the Lord. What does driving to work every morning or playing golf or washing the dishes or changing the baby have to do with our spiritual lives? How can we make a comment based on an everyday situation that will cause our friends to ask us what we meant? How can we ask them a question (again, based on an everyday situation) that will cause their thoughts to leap into the realm of spiritual things?

Let me emphasize at this point that the ability to turn a conversation around to spiritual things is not a "gift." It can't be found in any of the gift passages in the Bible (1 Corinthians 12 and so on). But *it can be learned!* The only requirement is that you be concerned enough about the salvation of your unsaved friend to practice thinking through your own everyday situations and plan ahead what you would like to say in each situation.

The following conversation steps will guide you through the process from talking about the weather to discussing the gospel. *This process is universal.* It doesn't depend on your personality. Anybody can carry on a conversation with another person using these four steps, if he or she *practices* the steps ahead of time. In fact, in some situations you will be able to go from step one to step four in just a few minutes. With long-term friends, work colleagues, or relatives, it may take you longer to get to step four, but if you practice the method beforehand, bathe it in prayer, and carry it in fear and trembling, the Lord might surprise you and allow you to get to step four with the most hardened antagonist!

Please, dear reader, learn and practice these four steps well.

### The Overview

1. *Surface Talk* -- Is the person alive? Talk about the weather, sports, and so on.
2. *Personal Talk* -- Will the person open up? Talk about family, jobs, or interests.
3. *Religious Talk* -- Is there interest in spiritual things? Talk about religion, churches, or church activities.

If the friend is not interested at this time, retreat to step two!

4. *Spiritual Talk* -- Is the person seeking God? Talk about what Christ has done for you; ask his or her view of Christianity. Then invite him or her to a Bible study *or* give the gospel.

If the friend is not seeking at this time, retreat to step three!

*Reality Check* -- Read Colossians 4:2-6.

1. *Surface talk* with our acquaintances opens the door to conversation. We do this all the time, often without knowing it.
2. *Personal talk* is the step of discovery. We want to know as much about our acquaintances as possible before moving on to more serious topics. We want our friends to open up about themselves.
3. *Religious talk* moves the conversation in the direction of the gospel. We are not going to give the gospel at this point. We have to find out if they are interested in spiritual things. Even our relatives, whom we think we know so well, may be seeking the Lord but may never have had anyone to talk to about it. This step is very important. Don't hurry on to step four, yet.

4. *Spiritual talk* will discover if our friends are seeking God or just dabbling in religious ideas. There are lots of moral people who don't want God to mess up their lives. Is the person truly point you have to decide what you want to offer your friend: the He spent more time making them thirsty for Him than He did telling them how to get into heaven.

Let's look at these four steps in some detail.

### **1. Surface Talk**

Have you ever stood next to a person in a shop for a few seconds and neither of you spoke? After a few more seconds, you both became uncomfortable. The reasons for this would need another book to explain, but the fact remains, you will reach in one of two ways. You will either step away from that person, putting more distance between you, or you will make some comment on a variety of neutral subjects. Perhaps you will mention the weather (if we had no weather, most of us wouldn't have anything to talk about!), the slow service in the shop, the horrible rush-hour traffic, and so on.

In most cases, we talk about such things because we can't handle long periods of silence with strangers or acquaintances. This level of conversation is the perfect starting place for an evangelistic conversation. Your only goal at this point is to mention something more personal about yourself than the weather: family, school, work, neighbors, pets or anything that opens your life up just a little to this acquaintance. Just mention it, don't give your life story! Then, casually ask the acquaintance about that same area of his or her life. For example, after you have mentioned the weather, say,

"Yes, I've lived here for [it doesn't matter how long], and I think that the weather is [it doesn't matter what you think about the weather]. Have you lived here long?"

Telling a person something about yourself gives you the unspoken right to ask that person the same thing. There are infinite possibilities for moving from surface talk to personal talk, as long as you remember your goal. You want people to open up about themselves. You are not interested in talking about yourself! You want to find out as much as possible about them. In order to do this effectively, you will have to *listen* to them more than you talk about yourself. As they open up a little bit, tell them a little more about yourself, and then ask them more about themselves. Most people love to talk about themselves. If you practice *listening* to people, you will make enormous progress in your evangelistic efforts.

### **2. Personal Talk**

This level of conversation is easy. You will never run out of things to talk about. You can ask questions about a person's birthplace, hometown, family, education, work, vacations, retirement, interests and hobbies, music, artistic abilities, politics, cooking, history, and sports of all kinds. One very good subject to talk about is weekends and free time. Ours has become an entertainment society.

Once a subject has been mentioned, ask a question about it. Use the five W's: Who? What? Where? When? Why? If possible, attempt to establish some common interests with the person. Just remember, you don't have to be an expert in a field to ask someone's opinion about that subject. You just have to be a good listener. And if you don't like what the person likes, show an interest in it anyway! You are *not* trying to change his or her priorities or hobbies. You are trying to bring that person to the Lord. Ask about his or her favorite sport, even if you don't know that a basketball is round and larger than a baseball.

One very important point is to find out the person's first name and use it off and on in the conversation. A person's first name is one of the most important words in his or her vocabulary.

Be genuinely interested in that person.

Throughout this level of conversation, watch the person's body language: eyebrows going up and down, eyes looking away from you, smiling or frowning, nervous tapping of feet or fingers, harsh or smooth voice tone, high or low voice pitch. You want to discover if the person is comfortable with the direction of the conversation. If the person seems to be closing up, don't feel guilty! Relax. Enjoy the practice and go find another acquaintance to talk to. If the person becomes vulgar in his vocabulary, ask yourself if this is his normal way of expressing himself or if he is trying to offend you. If this is how he normally talks, don't take offense and don't correct him. Keep *listening* and keep the conversation going. If he is trying to offend you (which is very rare at this level of conversation), start using "God talk" immediately, such as "The Bible says ..."; "Jesus always ..."; or "God wants us to ..." and so on. This will usually cause him to leave.

This level of conversation is very easy to learn, especially if you will carry out a little experiment with yourself. For the next week, spend thirty minutes a day starting conversations with strangers or acquaintances about surface topics and moving on to personal items. Then *ask questions about their interests and do not talk about yourself*. Try it! You will eventually see common interests develop.

### 3. Religious Talk

The first levels of conversation are pre-evangelism. They're all about building rapport. Now we are going to take the plunge. But first, let's destroy a wrong assumption on our part. Most believers assume that a stranger or acquaintance does not want to talk about religious things. This is categorically wrong. Even atheists like talking about their views of God! They may be irrational, but they love a listening ear. Although most people may not respond positively toward the gospel, they do appreciate having someone ask them about themselves and listening to their ideas or their problems in life. A listening ear may be the very thing that causes a person to seek God.

If you do get to the level of religious talk, and the person seems cool or antagonistic, retreat! Back down to the personal talk level. We are not called to push the gospel on anyone. When the apostle Paul witnessed in Acts, he "reasoned" with the people (Acts 17:17); he didn't force-feed them. If a person does not want to discuss religious things, then you can't reason with that person. Go back to talking about things at the second level and keep the conversation friendly.

When you transition from surface talk to personal talk, you make a statement about yourself and then you ask the other person a question about that same area of his or her life. The transition process is the same between personal talk and religious talk. For example, when talking about how you spend your weekends, says,

"Well, on weekends we usually [it doesn't matter what you do] on Saturday, and then we [eat in a restaurant, have friends over for lunch, whatever] after church."

Wait a few seconds for body language, then continue with, "Do you attend church?"

Regardless of the answer, say, "I see. Have you ever read the Bible?"

Regardless of the answer, say, "You know, I'm always interested in other people's viewpoints on what's in the Bible. Would you have time for us to get together *just one time* to read a passage together? I would really appreciate listening to what you think about it."

See how *easy* that is? And if you *practice having these conversations with imaginary people*, it will really start to come more naturally. Remember your goal: getting your acquaintance to read the Bible with you just one time.

Here are some topics and bridges that can lead into religious talk.

- Ask a new person in town if he has found everything he needs, like the post office, court house, church, school. Offer to help if he needs it.
- Ask a person in which church she was married and what kind of church it is. If the conversation continues in this direction, ask what her church believes about something such as prayer, working on Sunday, how to get to heaven, the person of Jesus. If the opportunity arises, ask *why* her church believes what it believes. Ask her if she believes the same as her church. If you start to share your beliefs, don't preach! You might even invite her to read the Bible with you one time to compare viewpoints on it.
- Talk about the Arab-Israeli conflict and how it all started.
- Decry the decline of morals and ask if evil people will ever be punished for their deeds. (Will God judge people someday?)
- Comment on the tabloids at the checkout counter.
- Use religious holidays as springboards about the real reason for the season.
- Use God-related phrases: Thank God. God bless you.
- Use different names for God: God, the Lord, the good Lord; then later, Jesus Christ, Jesus.
- Share your own personal spiritual truth about life without preaching a sermon.
- If the other person mentions God, use his or her words as a bridge.

What do we do when our acquaintance responds with silence? Smile and back down to the previous level of conversation. People are still noticing your witness! Don't feel guilty and press harder. Don't become discouraged and quit witnessing altogether. Leave the results to God. Many people may not want to talk about religious topics. Don't fret. Just accept it and keep looking for seekers.

What do we do if the person becomes aggressive? Stay friendly and break off the conversation as politely as possible. People respond negatively for a number of reasons. They might have had a bad experience with someone pushing religious views on them, and they now associate any conversation about spiritual things with that bad experience. You can easily help them overcome this by remaining friendly and not pushing the conversation any further. You might even mention that it really bothers you when people try to push their beliefs on you! This will usually disarm them and you might be able to resume the conversation at a less tense level.

Another reason people might respond negatively is because they are under conviction and intuitively know that the conversation will show them their sin, even though you never mention sin or their lifestyle. The Holy Spirit works inside human beings in ways that we cannot understand or predict.

If you are a friendly person and are trying to back down to the previous level of conversation, a person will rarely turn seriously aggressive. But if you are verbally attacked with vulgar language, then you may experience the joy of being persecuted for your faith. Rejoice and thank the Lord for allowing you to share in His sufferings. Your witness is making an impact. "Now, Lord, look on their threats, and grant to Your servants that with all boldness they may speak Your word" (Acts 4:29 NKJV).

#### **4. Spiritual Talk**

If you have been constantly building bridges from one subject to another, you will start to notice if the person wants to proceed with the conversation. You want to ask yourself, "Does this person's actions and attitudes indicate that he or she wants to talk about spiritual things?" If you sense an openness after the religious talk, you can move to spiritual talk by going in a number of directions.

*You can invite him or her to visit your church.* However, this might be too threatening at first.

*You can ask the person two questions:*

1. "If you were to die today, could you say for certain that you will go to heaven?"
2. "Why should God let you into His heaven? This question lets you know what the person is trusting."

*You can share the whole gospel with him or her.* If you choose this route, keep the message as simple as possible, use illustrations for each point and, if the person is open to it, repeat the main points of the gospel a number of times from different angles.

*You can ask the person to read the Bible with you one time* to see what God has to say about the things that you have been talking about. If this approach seems a little frightening to you at the moment, then you might invite the person to an evangelistic Bible study that is being led by someone else. This approach could give you the experience you desire to lead your own study in the near future.

The previous ideas should give you plenty of comments and questions to use in your own daily circumstances as you attempt to turn a conversation toward the spiritual realm. You simply have to *practice* thinking through the four levels of conversations ahead of time. The key is to remember your immediate goal. You do not want to give them the whole gospel all at once but rather you want to make them curious about your beliefs.

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