

ST. BARTHOLOMEW'S ANGLICAN CHURCH IN THE TOWN OF TONAWANDA, NY
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“ENGAGING THE CULTURE WITH THE GOSPEL” (part 3)

BUILDING GOSPEL - CENTERED RELATIONSHIPS

I. Review of Study #2

A. What makes something plausible? C _____, E _____, F _____

This parallels the three necessities for effective evangelism. Our evangelism must be **relational, experiential, and intellectual!**

What is the most important of the three?

B. Based on Acts 2:42-46 what are the five “devotions” of the early Church?

C. What are the three parts of a testimony?

D. Did anyone share their experience of God with someone in the last week? How did it go?

II. Removing Obstacles

In our current cultural moment, people are not ready to hear you share the gospel until you know you care about them. Their assumption is that Christians are mean and hateful. And they assume that what you have to say is mean and hateful. So they need to trust that you actually care about them before they are ready to listen to anything you have to say.

A. The Example of Paul

1 Corinthians 9:19-23: “For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. 20 To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law. 21 To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law. 22 To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. 23 I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings.”

Here we see that Paul is willing to be all things for all people. He is not just looking out for his own interests or preferences. But he is willing to adapt and sacrifice in order to build relationships with different people, in order to reach them with the gospel. He grew up as a very strict Jew, living by a specific code of conduct. Paul would have been repulsed by the idea of not following the Jewish customs of his time which included not eating meals with or even entering the house of a Gentile. However, as a Christian he gives up these deeply ingrained preferences in order for the sake of the gospel

He does this in order to build the necessary trust in order to reach people with the hope of Jesus. He is willing to set aside secondary things in order to make the gospel the primary thing. Now to be clear

Paul isn't saying to adapt to sinfulness in order to reach people But he is willing to adapt and sacrifice his personal preferences and his comforts in order to build the relationships needed to share the gospel

B. Possible opportunities today

What would that look like in our lives? One example could be building relationships and evangelizing across political divides. As a conservative republican, would you be willing to set aside politics to build a real relationship with a liberal democrat? As important as politics is: Would you be able to set aside politics and try to connect and build a friendship with someone with radically different political beliefs? Could you for the sake of the gospel, set aside political conversation that would easily become divisive, in order to welcome someone with radically different political views to your dinner table?

Another example might be building relationships across economic divides. As someone who is well off, could you socialize with someone of a different social class. Rosaria Butterfield, a well-known Christian author, tells the story of how her family befriended Hank their neighbor across the street. He was gruff, unruly, poor, and hard to connect with trash and things left all over the lawn. His house was falling apart at the seams. His dog was always getting loose and scaring people. No one in the neighborhood liked Hank. The other neighbors treated Rosaria and her family like they were crazy for trying to spend time with Hank. And it was not like Rosaria and her family were looking for those attributes in a friend. They simply understood that Hank was someone that God had put into their lives. And so, it was worth it to set aside personal preferences, in order to build a gospel centered relationship. And through their friendship Hank eventually came to put his trust in Jesus.

The problem that many of us face is that we are too attached to being comfortable When it really comes down to it we would rather be comfortable than sacrifice to share our faith with other people. But just like the Apostle Paul, we need to be willing to remove whatever obstacles we can in order to reach other people with the gospel

III. Developing Habits of Relationship Building

For the rest of tonight we are going to spend time talking about how to develop habits of building gospel centered relationships. Many Christians spend little or no time with unbelievers. We might say "well I haven't shared the gospel much because I don't really know too many non-Christians," or "If I had the opportunity to share the gospel more, I guess I would, but I just don't have the opportunities." However, God's invitation is to begin certain practices of intentional relationship building, and as we apply these intentional practices to our lives we will find more opportunities to share the gospel with others.

Of course, change doesn't happen overnight! Rather we should seek to apply seemingly small changes, here and there. And then all of a sudden, we will find that over many weeks and months and even years we will build new gospel centered relationships. Such relationships will give us the opportunities to share the gospel with others.

So, to that end I want to encourage us to three habits that will help us build gospel centered relationships: 1) Intentional Connections 2) Practicing Hospitality and 3) HEART dialogue

A. Intentional Connections

God has placed each of us in different neighborhoods, in different jobs, in different patterns of life. Each week we come across potentially dozens of different people, many of whom we come across regularly, maybe even daily or weekly. In this context, we want to learn to pause and see those people as eternal souls

In his book, *The Weight of Glory*, C.S. Lewis writes *“There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal.”* He reminds us that every person we ever interact with is an eternal soul made in the image of God. Our temptation, however, is to see people as objects or as ornaments to our surroundings. We must unlearn that and instead come to see them as God’s gifts to us to connect with and come to know.

God invites us to connect, not with every person we ever come across, but certainly with many of them, treating them as people God has called us to know and love and share the gospel. You have the same neighbors and probably see them, at least from a distance, regularly. Maybe you do your grocery shopping at the same place each week at the same time and see the same employees working there. You have coworkers you work with. The challenge is to engage people where they’re at.

Deacon Sluyter admits - *“If you are anything like me, I can go months and years without feeling the need to actually get to know many of these people beyond just saying “hi” to them. I confess I am not naturally gifted at building these kinds of things, though I am working on getting better at it day by day.”*

However, Deacon Sluyter’s wife, Lauren really makes the most of her times out. She has a habit of getting to know people, and not just superficially, but really being able to connect with them. Many days Lauren takes the kids out for walks around the neighborhood, and she goes out of her way to get to know as many of the neighbors as she can. If anyone is outside walking, or in their yards, she doesn’t just wave or say hi, but she strikes up conversation. She gets to know their names, where they work, their hobbies, about their families. And over time she really gets to know them through sharing news, personal struggles and challenges. The key is that she genuinely has a curiosity to get to know the other person. It’s about taking the initiative and considering others as the eternal soul God has placed in your path and not letting the opportunity to pass you by. Recall again Jesus words of the Great Commission in **Mt. 28:18-20**. Jesus said to GO!

B. Practicing Hospitality

The second habit that flows directly from initial connections is hospitality. What comes to mind for you when I say hospitality? In **1 Peter 4:9**, Peter writes, ***“Show hospitality to one another without grumbling.”*** In **Romans 12:13**, Paul tells us to ***“Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality.”*** Throughout God’s Word we see a command to show hospitality to others. In fact, in **Romans 12:13**, the Greek is especially striking. The verb *“seek to show”* is the word διώκω which can also be translated “to persecute.” It literally means a passionate and zealous pursuit of something. In other words, with the same kind of energy that Paul pursued and persecuted Christians, we are called to pursue hospitality! It is not something that we are just commanded to accept if it occasionally falls into our lap, but it is a command to go out of our way to provide hospitality to others.

So what does hospitality look like? It means opening up our homes and our lives to other people not just people that we particularly like, not just our close friends and family that we know will also invite us back to their house to have dinner next month but opening our lives and our homes to people who need it To people we don’t yet know all that well in the hopes to know them better and build a meaningful gospel centered relationship with.

Author and professor Rosaria Butterfield was converted to Christianity through radical hospitality. As a professor of English and Women’s Studies at Syracuse University, she was a radical feminist and she was a lesbian, living in a lesbian relationship in which they shared a house and a life together. Moreover, she hated Christianity and saw it as an enemy to peace and goodness and flourishing in the world. She began to work on a project focused on undermining the Christian worldview. As part of her research, she decided to interview some Christians.

One such interview was with a pastor, named Ken. Ken and his wife Floy didn't just let Rosaria interview them, but they invited her into their home and for whatever reason Rosaria said yes. For several years Rosaria regularly joined Ken and Floy in their home along with other Christians who she got to know in fellowship around the dinner table. Rosaria assumed she would be treated like an enemy. She assumed she would be attacked but she found she was treated with love and respect. Even though her views were politely and thoughtfully challenged and through their hospitality Rosaria: Saw and shared life with the community of God's people. She sang Psalms with them. Studied the Bible with them. Saw them pray in ways that surprised her. Saw them confess their sin to each other and forgive each other.

She was confronted with the facts of the gospel And as she began to pray and read the Bible herself she also began to experience God working in her life Just like the Acts 2 community we saw in Scripture last week And in the end, what started as a research project to attack Christianity Became the way she was invited by Christian hospitality To see the gospel lived out in a compelling community And ultimately how she came to put her trust in Jesus as her Lord

And perhaps you think now: Where do I start? How can I even begin the process of showing hospitality to others? My encouragement is to start small Start by committing one night a week to having people over that you don't normally spend time with Make a list of neighbors, or even people at church, that you would like to know better Or that you think that God is calling you to get to know better And invite them over for dinner. It doesn't need to be anything fancy, you don't need to professionally clean the house and treat it as a fine dining experience. Have simple food and enjoy simple fellowship

If you have the space for it invite 2 or 3 or 4 families over at the same time and begin to build community together And actually I recommend by starting with Christians Start showing hospitality and sharing life together with other Christians And then start inviting non-Christians into your home and into that casual Christian community. It all can start by a sacrificial offering of one night of your week to hospitality as Scripture teaches us to

C. HEART Dialogue

If our first habit is to seek to make intentional connections, and our second habit is to practice hospitality, our third habit is what can be called "HEART dialogue."

Our culture has in many ways lost its ability to dialogue with people we disagree with. But the model of HEART dialogue helps us to open up the conversation, help people to share their thoughts as well as listen, and helps us to keep the conversation going. In spiritual conversation many people struggle with the conversation starting up, but then very quickly shutting down and they aren't sure why

At Buffalo State we do evangelism on campus each week starting conversations with students in the union or in the quad around spiritual topics. I will often talk to a person there for an hour or even more. Often we will meet up in the future for further conversations and students who help me will often say. "Nick all the people who really want to talk always come to you"

But it really isn't the talkative ones come to me but I have cultivated the skills for HEART dialogue, that invite the other person and encourage the other person to desire to keep the conversation going rather than shutting down. **HEART stands for Hearing, Examining, Affirming, Reflecting, and a Tender Tone.**

1. Hearing - most of the time we are thinking about all the things we want to tell a person. But we are not usually thinking about how well we need to listen to what they have to say. But when it comes to hearing we need to demonstrate that we are more eager to be listeners than lecturers. We should never just assume

we know what the other person believes, like saying “Oh you are a Muslim that must mean you believe x y and z.”

Today many people take their beliefs from all over the place and we need to start with open ears and actually listen to what the individual person we are talking to actually thinks. Treating them as a human being with their own personal views and not just a robot that mimics the views we perceive for their labels. And when we struggle to listen, we should be praying and asking the Holy Spirit to help us focus patiently on listening rather than interrupting.

2. Examining - we need to show genuine curiosity about what the other person believes and start asking questions to get a conversation going. We might ask things like “What are your current spiritual beliefs?” Or “How have your religious beliefs changed over time?” Or “How do we know that we are living a good life?” Or “What do you think happens when we die?”

Those are examples of questions that can get a conversation going and I think of these questions similar to casting out a fishing line. Sometimes a fish just isn't going to bite. Sometimes it takes a few different casts. Sometimes it takes the time to pick out just the right lure. And almost never do you catch a fish on the first cast.

I grew up in NJ and most of my friends from high school are not Christian but a few years ago my friends Robert and Thomas came up to spend a weekend with us here in Buffalo. They grew up in a nominally Catholic house and had not been to church in over 15 years.

But when they visited we invited them to church and they said yes. And after church we were having lunch together. And I thought it was a perfect time to go fishing. “What did you guys think of church?” “Yeah it was fine” they both said. Not a bite. I asked a few more questions. Still no bite. Still just having some casual conversation. Then I asked “How do we know our life has any meaning?” And while Thomas still didn't engage with that question, Robert jumped at it. All of a sudden he was hooked. We talked for a long time about purpose and meaning. Through the conversation I kept using questions to point out that real meaning and purpose can only be found in God. Then over the course of the next few months and several long phone conversations Robert repented and put his faith in Jesus. Questions can open huge opportunities to real conversation.

The second thing we need to know about Examining is that there are many times that a statement will end a conversation, but a question can open it up. So instead of telling a fact we often should ask a question. For example, instead of saying “Jesus is the only way.” We might ask the question “Why do you think Jesus claimed to be the only way?” Instead of saying “People who don't believe in Jesus go to hell” We might ask the question “what should God do with people who reject him and don't want to be with him forever?”

3. Affirming - we want to affirm as much as we can in the other person's view before pointing out the differences. We want to show that there is some common ground between us, even if we disagree about Jesus we may have some similar values. We can affirm aspects of truth. Perhaps a person we know is passionate about saving the environment. God does call us to care for the environment even if we come to different conclusions about what that looks like. It is good to affirm the similarity. We also can affirm feelings. Perhaps a person is completely wrong from the Christian perspective. But we can still affirm by showing an appreciation for their passion.

4. Reflecting - Often in conversations about the gospel and religion people become offended. They get nervous or scared or they may feel pressed into a corner and start lashing out. The practice of reflecting slows down the conversation and gives everyone space to breathe and know they are being heard. In reflecting we summarize and repeat back to the other person what they said to us in a way that shows we are really listening to them. “So what I hear you saying is that from your perspective there is no evidence that Jesus ever existed and that Christians are just wishful thinking because they want their lives to be better” And

as we repeat back their thoughts we show that we understand and that we are listening. It also gives us time to slow down the conversation and to carefully think of our own response. It keeps the conversation friendly rather than adversarial.

5. Tender Tone - We do not raise our voice in attack but we keep our conversation gentle, showing that we know the other person is another eternal soul, made in the image of God. We treat the other person as an ally rather than as an enemy. For example when we think of someone as an enemy we might want to say, "That view is crazy, how can you be so stupid to believe that!" but if in our hearts we see them as an ally we might instead ask "Can you help me understand something that is confusing to me about that view?"

IV. Workshop: HEART

What we are going to do now is workshop an aspect of heart dialogue and in particular we are going to practice the skill of examining by asking questions instead of making statements. There will be a few statements on the screen and in groups of about three we will work on what we could ask another person instead of making a statement.

Start at any one you want and try to get as many done as you can in about 10 minutes. Then I will call us back together and we can share what we came up with.

V. Workshop: plan for practicing hospitality

Lastly, I want to send us out with a challenge. Tonight, we talked about HEART dialogue

But perhaps even more important we talked about our call to practice hospitality. The challenge for us is to commit ourselves to a habit of hospitality Start small. Think of 3 or 4 people or families that you want to connect with better; like neighbors, coworkers, or other church members. Then one day each week begin having people over that you wouldn't normally have over for dinner. Then perhaps invite a few over at once. This then can build a sense of Christian community with God at the center.