

# A Guide to Gospel Conversations

## 1 Peter 3:16-17

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Steve DeWitt

*"Now who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is good? But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect, having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame. For it is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God's will, than for doing evil."* (1 Peter 3:13-17 ESV)

I saw a Chinese Proverb this week that describes well our failures in evangelism. "Man stand for long time with mouth open before roast duck fly in." That hit my funny bone as I pictured a Chinese man standing with his mouth open hoping that a fully cooked and prepared duck would just fly in.

Yet how do we often view our role in the Great Commission Jesus gave us to make disciples? We will just be over here and maybe somebody will happen along who out of the blue asks us, "I want to be saved, how can I?" That almost never happens, does it? Evangelism doesn't just happen. Roast ducks don't just fly in.

1 Peter is written to Christians in crisis. They are being persecuted. They are suffering. It would be natural to think our trials and pain are hindrances to effective witness. You may be in the midst of a real hard time yourself. You think, *I just got get through this and then I can do ministry again*. Peter calls us to reverse psychology about pain and trouble. That's not evangelistic downtime; that is evangelistic prime time.

Let's quickly review what we we've seen because we are spending another week in this text. Peter says first in verse 13 that lives lived in kindness and compassion for others' needs around us are generally admired by the unbelieving world. Even when it's not, God admires it and blesses it.

The early church rocked the Roman world by caring for strangers, widows, and orphans. Followers of Zeus or Aphrodite weren't generous or caring for others. These Christians cared for the marginalized in society and the world took note. The reason they do is they are made in the image of God (see diagram below).



There is one more point of shared spiritual experience. Pain. To live in this broken world is to suffer. These trials come to the Christian and the non-Christian. The broader context of 1 Peter is pain. The pain brought upon Christians by those opposed to them.

### Observable Hope in our Pain/Mess

Imagine this with me. First century Asia Minor Christian Frank applies for membership in the local business guild. He is denied membership by the board of directors simply because of his Christian faith. A member of the board delivers the news. After sharing the news, Frank is surprisingly upbeat. The board member walks away wondering, what's up with Frank?

First century Asia Minor Christian student Sally is at school. Everyone knows her family doesn't worship at the temple of Zeus. Parents have warned their kids about Sally and her family. Sally isn't exactly welcomed in social circles at school yet she seems pretty ok with it. It's like her identity isn't found in what the cool girls think of her. The other students wonder, what's up with Sally?

First century Asia Minor Christian John is at the hospital. Why? He is very sick. The doctor and nurses see many patients over the day. Everybody's sick. Everybody's fearful. Everybody's despairing. Everybody but John. He's human and doesn't want to be sick. Yet the nurses see in him something different. Those nurses have pain in their own lives, they wonder what John has that they don't.

Rich. Poor. Religious. Atheistic. Powerful. Everyone suffers. We want to hide our sufferings and act like everything is ok. Peter urges us a different way. How so? Again we read verse 15, *"But in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you."*

Hope is like the stars; you only see them at night. When the sun is up, it's hard to see the stars. When everything is great in life, hope is invisible. Hope becomes evident in the dark nights of the soul.

Peter urges us to be ready to give answers. This assumes that unbelievers are asking questions. Where do the questions come from? Their observation of our lives; not perfection or the projection of having it all together. Actually our attempts to appear perfect are counterproductive to this. ***It is simply real Christianity observed through real Christians dealing with real problems with the only hope in this world found in Jesus.***

When unbelievers see hope, they ask about it. That's verse 15. Our lives display hope and unbelievers ask about it. Be ready to give an answer when they do.

We have to see the brokenness of our lives as opportunities. None of us are exempt from experiencing the effects of a life and a world that is fallen:

- We know what it's like for work to be frustrating.
- We know what it's like for home, family and relationships to have conflict and strife.
- We know what it's like to have financial worries.
- We know what it's like to suffer loss and hurt
- We know what it's like to get caught up in our crazy, busy schedules
- We know what it's like to get discouraged and have doubts.

One of the most powerful ways we witness for Jesus is when we say to people, "I know exactly what you're going through and this is where I've found the good news of Jesus to be powerful, helpful, freeing, comforting etc..." One of the reasons canned gospel presentations often fall on deaf ears is that they seem like abstract truth that mean nothing for life.

When you share how the gospel frees you to ask forgiveness of your wife and kids in your anger or how knowing Jesus allows you to be sympathetic, serve your difficult boss or neighbor, or how your hope in Jesus allows you to live with unfulfilled dreams or desires, that's powerful to an unbeliever who is dealing with all the same things but without hope.

What is our country thinking about right now? Charleston, South Carolina. Nine people shot dead in a church. What did this church do two days after the murders? They forgave the murderer. That makes an unbelieving world sit up straight. Why? Forgiveness is not the natural response. Vengeance is. Might there be a few visitors to that church today? *They've got something here that I don't have. I want to check it out.*

All of a sudden the hope of the gospel hits home. They see how this hope is working in you.

### **Speak with Gentleness**

*"Always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect."* (Verse 15)

I was raised in a church with a more confrontational style of evangelism. People certainly were saved by it but how many people were turned off by it? Too often talk about religion turns into debate. These rarely end with conversions to Christianity.

Shouting doesn't help but *gentleness* does. Gentleness is the way we say what we say. The tone. The sense of it which the other person perceives. When we are calm, kind, and conversational as we share our story of faith or maybe share the gospel of Jesus, the tone endears the truth.

What do we instinctively do when someone yells at us? Confronts us? Gets in our face? We take a defensive posture. We want to self-protect. But when we sense someone cares about us or is treating us kindly, our heart opens to them.

If you think condemning is the only way to go, check out how Jesus talked with the Samaritan woman at the well. He had the right to condemn her and her life of sexual sin but he built rapport with her and drew her toward the truth. When it was all done she rushed to her hometown and invited everyone else to go talk to him. That's a sign of a good conversation. A tone of gentleness.

### **Reverence God/Respect the Other Person**

*"...with gentleness and respect."* (Verse 15)

The Greek word for respect is *phobos*, we get phobia from it. You may say, finally a Greek word that helps me. I have phobia about sharing my faith. Actually, the phobia is to be toward God. That is why it is translated reverence or respect. It's debated whether it's toward God or the other person. Peter always uses this word vertically toward God. That's probably the sense here, but reverence for God will show itself in respectful actions toward others.

Do you listen to people who disrespect you? Probably not. I think this speaks to a sense of dignity and dependence in this. *If our sharing is a comedy act, we don't have reverence for God. If our sharing is demeaning toward others, we don't have respect for man.* Peter is encouraging humble evangelism. Not vitriolic. It's not, *we're better than you! What's your problem?* Instead, it's respectfully and humbly telling how Jesus provides real hope and help in the struggles of life. People will listen to that.

### **Tips and Helps for Lifestyle Evangelism**

(Adapted from Jonathan Dodson, "8 Ways to Easily be Missional," [www.vergenetwork.org](http://www.vergenetwork.org))

#### **Be Intentional**

Jonathan Dodson writes about engaging people with gospel conversations. One of our biggest problems is that we allow our schedules to fill with activities that keep us from relationships where 1 Peter 3:15 could even happen. For people to see the hope in us, don't they have to know us? We need to flee the Christian ghetto and engage people. I say this to myself as well. So here is Dodson's list of ways in everyday life to create contexts for 1 Peter 3:15.

#### **Eat with non-Christians**

Guess what? Non-Christians eat three meals a day; so do we. Doesn't that scream opportunity? It's not like we sit down to eat and say, "I'm just eating with you to tell you about Christianity." That's artificial and a big turn off. Be genuinely interested in them and their lives. A meal together communicates relationship. Jesus used meals to build friendship.

#### **Walk, don't drive**

Walking around the neighborhood provides opportunities. Especially walking with a stroller. Get a stroller. It doesn't matter if there is a kid in there or not...walk. As you walk, people are out and about—neighbors. Stop and say hi. Engage them in normal conversation. It's a great way to build an entry level relationship. I read this tip somewhere: sit in front of your house instead of behind. We tend to hide in our backyards, but if you sit in the driveway, people say hi. So put yourself in places where conversations can happen. It's great to take advantage of this in the summer. In my neighborhood, we hardly see anybody through the winter.

#### **Be a regular**

By frequenting the same coffee shop or café, you get to know the staff. Over time rapport is built with the staff and regulars.

#### **Hobby with non-Christians**

Here is where shared interests can be used. Fishing. Bears games. Golf. Shared kids' activities or hobbies. All of these are places where friendships can form. They are not threatening and are interesting. They help because the hobby is a mutual interest and can be pursued together.

## Volunteer with nonprofits

Not only can you meet people but you can also bring people. If Habitat for Humanity is having a build morning, would your handyman neighbor be interested in going with you? Would serving tap into his craving for meaning in his life?

## Participate in city events

Get the kids off the Xbox and show up for the clean the city day. Go to the outdoor symphony concert or the 4<sup>th</sup> of July parade. These are all neutral ground places to be neighborly and get to know people.

## Serve your neighbors

Serving our neighbors does two things really well. First, it shows genuine interest in their well-being. When someone helps you without pay, it's hard to question their motives. Do it more than once and people will think you actually care about them. Second, serving our neighbors creates contexts for gospel conversation, especially when they are in crisis. Their hearts are tender. They are on the verge of tears. When we meet some need and show we care, it tears down their defenses.

Jennifer has a real eye and heart for this. Recently she made a meal for one of our neighbors who is going through a hard time. We showed up on their doorstep unannounced, full meal and dessert in hand. They welcomed us in. We asked how they were. There were tears in the eyes. We left a feast of a meal with them. What did they think as we left? How did we feel as we left? It's a win-win.

So take a moment and look at this list. Can you identify maybe two of them that you could be intentional about in the coming week?

## Be a story listener

1 Peter envisions unbelievers asking Christians about their hope. They are looking for hope in the story of their lives. Engage them in that story. This assumes a level of relationship, but what about asking them to tell you their story? Then listen. Don't point out their mistakes or that they should have done this or that. Just listen. That story is sacred to them. If they sense authenticity in you, they will likely be honest about their struggles.

Don't be in a rush to tell a story; listen first. Let them see in your eyes you care for them as a person. You might spend weeks just listening. Whatever it takes for them to sense you care, which of course, you must.

## Be a story teller

I challenged us last week that the evangelism Peter envisions here is not aggressive apologetics or arguments but story telling. Telling the story of how you got hope. They've observed it. They know something is different. Your life has created questions. Now they are seeking answers. I think there is definitely an important place for defending the faith, but 99% of the time, they aren't looking for philosophical answers, they are looking for life answers and they sense you might have something they don't.

Tell your story. You might say, *my story is boring*. I was raised in a Christian home...blah, blah, blah. They won't be so concerned with *when* you got hope but *how* you did.

Here is where our formula approach is unhelpful. The gospel isn't a formula or a three-step program. It is a person—Jesus. It is a life-transforming truth. It is a divine offer of love and salvation. Don't try and press them or their experience into your formula. Simply tell them the difference Jesus has made in your life, specifically in your pain. You don't have to show it all at once. They won't relate to your Jesus and VBS story, but they will to your story about your divorce, your cancer, the loss of your job, the death of your mother, or your child's illness. Talk about how your faith brought you through that time and how real it was to you. Talk about a personal relationship with Jesus. Talk about him like he's as real as the wind. At worst, it leaves them wondering. At best, it leaves them believing. Yes, talk about sin and the cross. Yes, talk about resurrection. But these can be brought out over time as their curiosity leads the conversation.

This assumes these are realities in our lives. Evangelist D.T. Niles once said, "Evangelism is witness. It is one beggar telling another beggar where to get food." (D.T. Niles, *The Preaching of Daniel Thambirajah (D.T.) Niles: Homiletical Criticism*, p. 57) We can only share what we have ourselves. Here is where a real sense of God's grace to us in Jesus and God's grace to us in our trials and God's hope in us through them is practically what we can share. Have it first. Share it second.

I would finally add, pray for people. Pray for your neighbors. Pray for your family members. Pray for your coworkers or fellow students. Pray that God would save them. Pray that God would give you opportunities. Pray for wisdom when those opportunities come. Then be intentional. Be ready. Be winsome and gentle. Be real and authentic. Listen. Then speak and tell your story of hope found in Christ.

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