

**COMPLETE GUIDE**

**SAMPLE**



Practicing the 9 Arts of

# Spiritual Conversations

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# WHY CULTIVATE THESE PRACTICES?

## the **big** idea

With a fresh perspective and simple, everyday practices, any Christian can engage in the Great Commission.

### **ice breaker**

What kind of feeling does the term *evangelism* stir up inside you? How would you define *evangelism*?

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### **related Scripture**

*This is a large work I've called you into, but don't be overwhelmed by it. It's best to start small. Give a cool cup of water to someone who is thirsty, for instance. The smallest act of giving or receiving makes you a true apprentice. You won't lose out on a thing.*

Matthew 10:42 (MSG)

### **challenging wisdom**

*Perhaps the most obvious observation is that most unchurched people are not being pursued by anyone.*

– George Barna

## TODAY'S CHALLENGE

Author Mark Mittelberg claims that evangelism is “one of the highest values in the church and one of the least practiced.” You’ll find it talked about from the pulpit, included in church mission statements, and written about in many books. Almost every Christian knows the Matthew 28:18-20 verses, commonly called the Great Commission, where Jesus tells his closest followers to go and make disciples of all nations. Mittelberg continues, “The irony is that while many of us are in churches and denominations that have a rich heritage and strong reputation for evangelism, in many cases, precious little is actually happening. Let’s be honest: in most ministries very few lost people are being reached for Christ.”<sup>1</sup> *Ouch!* Could this be true?

Evangelism in the 21st century has become an activity relegated to a small minority of Christians. Surveys on spiritual gifts conducted at Willow Creek Community Church and Saddleback Church revealed that only about 10% of their people identified that they possess the gift of evangelism or are passionate enough about it to participate regularly in sharing their faith. If that is representative of

the Christian community, then 90% of our team is still uninvolved in sharing the good news about Jesus. Jerry Root and Stan Guthrie, authors of *The Sacrament of Evangelism*, observe, “Evangelism has become the hobby of the few, rather than a joyful expectation of all.”<sup>2</sup>

Many Christians seem to believe that their main role in evangelism is to bring nonbelievers to church where a paid professional will tell them about Jesus. The evidence suggests that this attractional church model alone is not working well. When the Barna Research Group surveyed the aggregate body of unchurched adults, it found:

- 4% were invited to attend church with a friend and came
- 23% were invited to attend but declined
- 73% were never invited<sup>3</sup>

According to George Barna in his book *Rechurching the Unchurched*, “Perhaps the most obvious observation is that most unchurched people are not being pursued by anyone.”<sup>4</sup> The results from this combined data tell us that 73% of non-Christians are virtually ignored, while 90% of Christians remain inactive.

<sup>1</sup> Mark Mittelberg, *Building a Contagious Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007), 16.

<sup>2</sup> Jerry Root & Stan Guthrie, *The Sacrament of Evangelism* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2011), 56.

<sup>3</sup> George Barna, *Rechurching the Unchurched* (Ventura, CA: Issachar Resources, 2000), 111.

<sup>4</sup> Barna, 111.

**1 DISCUSS ::** Do you think that evangelism is the job of Christians with the spiritual gift of evangelism or of all Christians? Explain your answer.

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## HOW CAN ALL CHRISTIANS SHARE THE GOOD NEWS?

The word *evangelism* comes from the Greek word *euangelion*, which means “good news.” If everyone who follows Jesus has good news to share with those who don’t know him, there must be a way to make evangelism simple and universal so that all of us are involved, not just a select few.

Pastor Francis Chan helps us understand what counts as good news: “God’s definition of what matters is pretty straightforward. He measures our lives by how we love.”<sup>5</sup> Our mandate from Jesus in Matthew 22:36-39 is clear: Love God, love people. Could it be that simple? We may have complicated evangelism by separating this Great Commandment from the Great Commission.

Loving God and loving others is the foundation of the Great Commission. To make disciples of people outside of our churches, you start by loving them, building authentic friendships based on trust, and earning the right to engage in conversations about God as he is revealed in the Bible.

**2 DISCUSS ::** What grade would you give yourself for making disciples (evangelism): A, B, C, D, or F? What grade would you give your church? Explain your answers.

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So how can all Christians engage in evangelism? We seem to value the big stuff: the grandiose Olympic opening ceremony; the game-winning, last-second score; the glamorous, opulent royal wedding. We can’t help ourselves. We eat it up.

We carry this perspective into our approach to evangelism. We like the big outreach event, the dramatic conversion, and closing the deal with the all-important sinner’s prayer. The little stuff doesn’t seem to matter as much to us. However, in order to share the good news

about Jesus intentionally today, we may have to start with a new perspective—focusing on the little things.

Consider a principle from a book called *The Tipping Point*,<sup>6</sup> in which journalist Malcolm Gladwell discusses why crime in New York City took a precipitous decline in the 1990s. Gladwell explains the Broken Window theory of criminology—that if a window is broken and left unrepaired in a neighborhood, people will slowly conclude that no one cares and no one is in charge, and more serious crimes will increase. To reverse the crime trend of the 1980s, NYPD focused on little things—graffiti, panhandling, subway turnstile jumping—and there was a reduction in overall crime quantity and severity. Many New York cops couldn’t understand why they were fixing windows when there were more serious crimes to address, but the little stuff really mattered, and had a remarkable impact.

**3 DISCUSS ::** What are some little things that could really matter in showing love to your non-Christian friends?

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Interestingly, the little things seemed to matter to Jesus too: “*And if you give even a cup of cold water to one of the least of my followers, you will surely be rewarded*” (Matthew 10:42, NLT). Water held great significance in the arid land of Israel in the first century. It was scarce. Water meant life, cleansing, refreshment.

In today’s evangelistic economy, little things don’t seem to count for much. But one could argue that small, simple steps—modern-day “cups of cold water” like paying attention to someone, listening to them, praying for them—should count as evangelism.

**4 DISCUSS ::** What do you think would be something in today’s culture that is scarce, that people would thirst for?

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<sup>5</sup> Francis Chan, *Crazy Love: Overwhelmed by a Relentless God* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2008), 93.

<sup>6</sup> Malcolm Gladwell, *The Tipping Point* (Little, Brown and Company, 2000).

**CUPS OF COLD WATER:  
SIMPLE CONVERSATION PRACTICES?**

Generally, we are poor conversationalists. We talk way too much. We listen very little. We offer our unsolicited opinions. We have short attention spans. We formulate our response while others are speaking. We are generally not curious. Mostly, we want to talk about ourselves.

If we are not good at ordinary conversations, how can we talk meaningfully about spiritual matters, which are often emotionally charged by our past experiences? We must be honest with ourselves. Even if we are good at small talk, most of us are not good at “God talk” with our family, our friends, our neighbors, our classmates, or our coworkers. Participating in the Great Commission will inevitably mean having conversations with people in ways that hopefully nudge them toward Jesus. So, we all need to improve in our conversational ability, to engage the spiritually curious, and to begin a journey of discovery with them about God and the Bible.

If evangelism is going to become a normal part of our lives, it will have to be something we enjoy doing and can truly envision doing tomorrow, next month, and five years from now. That’s why we need memorable activities that can be done by ordinary people as part of a normal routine, providing a pathway to spiritual conversations.

These activities, while simple, must be incorporated at a deep heart level. Like learning a musical instrument, getting good at spiritual conversations with those who believe differently from you is an art that takes practice. We at Q Place have identified nine simple practices that we call the 9 Arts of Spiritual Conversations.™ They include *Arts for Getting Ready* for spiritual conversations: Noticing, Praying, Listening; *Arts for Getting Started* with spiritual conversations: Asking Questions, Loving, Welcoming; and *Arts for Keeping It Going*: Facilitating, Serving Together, and Sharing.

**5 DISCUSS ::** Can you recall a time when you had a spiritual conversation with someone that went well? How about one that didn’t go well? What were the differences?

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**ASSESS**  
 **How satisfied are you with how well you practice the 9 Arts?** Take this Spiritual Conversations Assessment and rate your level of effectiveness with each of the nine arts on a scale of 1 – 5. (1 = not satisfied at all, 5 = totally satisfied)

\_\_\_ **Noticing** those around me and paying close attention to what God might be doing in their lives.

\_\_\_ **Praying** for those I meet in my day-to-day life and asking God to show me what he wants me to do to bless them.

\_\_\_ **Listening** with genuine care, interest, and empathy as I interact with others without editorializing or offering my own unsolicited opinions.

\_\_\_ **Asking Questions** that arise from genuine curiosity, drawing others out with great questions, seeking to understand more than to be understood.

\_\_\_ **Loving** others authentically because I personally know God's love and see them with his eyes.

\_\_\_ **Welcoming** people by valuing their presence so that they feel that they belong.

\_\_\_ **Facilitating** good discussions in a group setting so that every person feels honored and respected, even when they believe differently from me.

\_\_\_ **Serving Together** by gathering people to serve and know God and each other better through service.

\_\_\_ **Sharing** my own story, learning others' stories, and expressing God's story of forgiveness through Jesus in a way that is respectful and meaningful.

**Discuss your assessment with the group. In which practices would you like to improve? (Examples: notice people more, ask better open-ended questions, listen more empathetically.) What actions will help you improve?**

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## PRACTICE ON YOUR OWN

In the coming week, become aware of how often you practice any of the 9 Arts during an average day. Journal these experiences. Write down the strengths and weaknesses you discover and share them the next time you meet.

Before the next meeting, intentionally do three simple things:

1. Notice, pray for, and listen to people.
2. Invite God to show you the people he wants you to notice, and be attentive to his promptings.
3. Keep a list of people God prompts you to notice.

## GETTING THE BIG IDEA

There are specific practices, or arts, that lead to authentic spiritual conversations. With practice and intentionality, Christians can improve in these nine simple areas and experience an increase in meaningful spiritual conversations

## QPlace STORY

Nancy was a new teacher in the school district. A few other teachers noticed her and recognized her need for new friends. These Christian teachers befriended Nancy and began praying for her, though she didn't know it. They prayed for opportunities to care for her, have loving conversations with her, and that God would open her heart to him. As they spent time together, Nancy appreciated how much these friends simply listened to her talk about her job, her family, her past, and her questions about God. While listening, they would often ask questions so they could get to know her better, understand her spiritual perspectives, and show they cared. Frequently, these friends welcomed her into their homes, to go hiking, to get a cup of coffee, and eventually to a group Bible study.

When they saw a need, they were quick to reach out and help,

as a natural part of their lives. Using these practices, anyone can engage in evangelism, sharing the good news about Jesus.

## RESOURCES TO CHECK OUT

- *Corner Conversations* by Randy Newman (Kregel Publications)
- “Godly Conversation” by T. M. Moore in *ViewPoint*, 4/29/2010 (The Chuck Colson Center for Christian Worldview)
- *Rechurching the Unchurched* by George Barna (Issachar Resources)
- “Nothing Much to Talk About? The Importance of Conversation” by T. M. Moore, in *Breakpoint*, 4/9/2007 (The Chuck Colson Center for Christian Worldview)
- *The Forgotten Ways* by Alan Hirsch (Brazos Press)
- *Building a Contagious Church* by Mark Mittelberg (Zondervan)

demonstrating love to Nancy in real, tangible ways. As she began to attend the Bible study, the group encouraged Nancy to ask questions and accepted her for who she was and where she was spiritually. The group discussions were facilitated in a way that focused on discovery and everyone learning together. This put Nancy at ease.

Eventually, Nancy's friends invited her to attend church with them. She willingly accepted because she felt she could trust them. Nancy's sense of belonging and purpose deepened when she was invited to serve with the others, and she felt closer to the group than ever. Throughout this time together, trust developed and her friends began naturally sharing the good news of Jesus with Nancy. The prayers they had been praying were answered and Nancy committed her life to Jesus.



**Getting Ready:** Noticing, Praying, Listening  
**Getting Started:** Asking Questions, Loving, Welcoming  
**Keeping It Going:** Facilitating, Serving Together, Sharing

These nine practices build a foundation for spiritual conversations to happen naturally, so you can talk about God with anyone. The 9 Arts Complete Guide has 36 interactive sessions for discussion and hands-on practice.

*Practicing the 9 Arts of Spiritual Conversations: Complete Guide* can be used:

1. By individuals who desire vibrant spiritual conversations with those around them
2. In a triad of facilitators getting ready to launch a Q Place
3. In a small group of Christians wanting to grow in these practices
4. In Sunday school classes and a variety of church-based discipleship groups



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***Q Place empowers Christians to engage in meaningful conversations about God with people who believe differently.***



# WHAT ARE GOOD QUESTIONS?

## the big idea

Flowing out of genuine interest, good questions draw people out and spur on conversation.

### ice breaker

What unique question have you been asked in a job interview?

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### related Scripture

*As Jesus and his disciples, together with a large crowd, were leaving the city, a blind man, Bartimaeus, . . . began to shout, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" Many rebuked him and told him to be quiet, but he shouted all the more. . . . Jesus stopped and said, "Call him." So they called to the blind man, "Cheer up! On your feet! He's calling you." Throwing his cloak aside, he jumped to his feet and came to Jesus. "What do you want me to do for you?" Jesus asked him. The blind man said, "Rabbi, I want to see."*

Mark 10:46-51 (NIV)

### challenging wisdom

*We are exploring together. We are cultivating the garden together, backs to the sun. The question is a hoe in our hands and we are digging beneath the hard and crusty surface to the rich humus of our lives.*

– Parker Palmer

## GOOD QUESTIONS UNCOVER STORIES

A not-for-profit organization called StoryCorps provides people of all backgrounds and beliefs with the opportunity to record, share, and preserve the stories of their lives. This organization preserves and shares stories “to remind one another of our shared humanity, to strengthen and build the connections between people, to teach the value of listening, and to weave into the fabric of our culture the understanding that every life matters.”<sup>1</sup> To unearth the incredible stories buried away in the lives of people, StoryCorps asks questions. Here are a few examples: What was the happiest moment of your life? Who has been the biggest influence on your life, and what lessons did that person teach you?

Every person has a story—a lifetime of experiences that have shaped them and impacted their emotions, their

spiritual life (or lack thereof), and their relationships. All these little stories make up their big story. When people have some space to tell their stories, they feel loved and empowered. So if you want to show love to people, listen to their stories; and to unlock their stories, ask good questions.

Good questions allow people to discover—or rediscover—themselves, and uncover new truths. Good questions show that we care enough to be curious. And true curiosity—genuine interest in a person and his or her story—flows from the conviction that each person’s life matters. Being authentically curious about someone’s thoughts and opinions can create a bond of trust that allows deeper and more significant conversations to continue and grow. And, good questions can also help people face and wrestle with their beliefs about God.

**1 PRACTICE ::** Let curiosity lead you in asking good follow-up questions as each person in the group responds to this question: How did you typically spend summers when you were in grade school? After everyone has answered this question, discuss how these stories have affected what you feel about the others in your group.

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**2 DISCUSS ::** Describe a time when you experienced someone communicating an inaccurate view of Christianity. As a group, discuss what question you could ask as a “learner” that would communicate your care for the person through the conversation.

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Becoming a good question-asker depends on having the right heart and right motives when engaging others in conversations. We are at our best when we align our heart and motives with our leader, Jesus.

Consider this example from the life of Jesus in Mark 10: Jesus was walking out of Jericho in the middle of a clamoring crowd. Bartimaeus, a blind man, was sitting beside the road shouting for Jesus’ attention over the din. When Jesus heard him, he stopped, told the people to bring him over, and asked him, “*What do you want me to do for you?*”

In this brief interaction, Jesus doesn’t ask many questions, or even a particularly profound question. His question is simple, but the entire scene reveals that it comes from a heart of great care for this man. First, Jesus is attentive; he hears the cry of Bartimaeus over the noise. Second, even though the crowd rebukes and disregards Bartimaeus, Jesus puts all of his plans on hold in order to stop and connect with him. Then, Jesus responds in a way that shows Bartimaeus is not a project, but a valued person. Rather than just assuming this man wants to be able to see, Jesus asks a question that allows Bartimaeus the dignity of communicating what he most desires—and in that moment, Bartmaeus also is given the chance to reveal his faith in Jesus.

Reporters know that it takes practice to develop good question-asking skills. But reporters who focus solely on producing an article or a news clip ask questions much differently from those who truly value the people they are interviewing. When we take a personal interest in someone and come into a conversation as a learner, our questions reveal our care for them. It’s helpful to wonder, *What can I learn from this person? How does God want me to relate to this person? What does God want me to learn in this interaction?*

## CHARACTERISTICS OF GOOD QUESTIONS

Asking good questions doesn’t mean firing a barrage of inquiries at someone or using a formula. Instead, good questions are combined with good listening. The goal is to help people feel safe and heard, not attacked or like a “project.” Here are five characteristics of good questions:

1. Good questions originate from curiosity and a genuine interest in another person.
2. Good questions are open-ended. Use classic starters like *Who, What, Why,* and *How* (motivated by curiosity rather than interrogation).
3. Good questions are concise. Don't ramble—end at the question mark and then listen.
4. Good questions connect with what’s being discussed and take the discussion to the next step rather than come out of nowhere.
5. Good questions help people feel safe and understood. Rephrase what they said to be sure you understood their answer and to give them a chance to correct you if you didn’t.

Good questions help people in the process of self-discovery and God-discovery. For example, a great question to ask is “How do you think God might have been active in that?” This question invites people to consider how God may actually have been present in the story they are telling about themselves (which might be a stretch for a non-Christian), and helps them to pay attention to what he might be doing in the present as well.

It’s tempting to ask questions just to get people to give us the “right answer” and then move on. But the goal of spiritual conversations is dialogue—a two-way exchange. To that end, often the best questions are follow-up questions. When we invite someone to tell us something or share an opinion, we should not move on too quickly. Instead, ask questions to clarify, or get more details, or have them



elaborate on emotions. (“How did that make you feel?” or “Wow, can you tell me more about that?”) Avoid follow-up questions that accuse. (“How on earth can you think that?” or “Why would anyone do such a thing?”)

**3 DISCUSS ::** How do those who know you well rate you as a question-asker who helps them feel safe and heard?

Based on what you are learning, what could you do to improve?

**4 DISCUSS ::** In what circumstances do you find yourself drifting toward questions that inhibit good conversations?

What helps you come up with better ones?

**5 DISCUSS ::** Describe a time when a person who was trying to prove you wrong or convince you to change your mind questioned you or found fault with your thinking. How did that feel?

## PRACTICES TO AVOID

The word *question* comes from the Latin root *querere*, “to ask, seek.” It’s related to the word *query*. In its purest form, a question seeks an answer or information that you do not yet have. When we ask questions to lead someone to agree to our belief, people typically resent the feeling of being “set up.” To help you create good questions, here are some practices to avoid:

1. Don’t primarily use closed-ended (yes/no) or multiple choice questions. They tend to kill a conversation.
2. Don’t ask leading, coercive, or cornering questions. For example, rather than asking, “Why don’t you believe in God when there’s so much overwhelming evidence he exists?” you could say, “God is very real to me, and yet at times I have doubts. I’m wondering what doubts you might have.”
3. Don’t ask and then answer your own question in your question. For example: “Why did you stop going to church; was it the boring sermons?”
4. Don’t fill the silence after your question. Enjoy the pause! For example, don’t keep adding to your question with pile-on phrases like, “Would you like to meet me for coffee next week? . . . Or maybe you are too busy? . . . Or is next week too soon? . . . Or would you like to just call me instead of deciding right now?”
5. Don’t ask formulaic or methodical questions. People can tell when they are the recipients of canned questions or a rehearsed approach. Be natural and winsome and consider the context.

Rather than crafting questions the way a trial lawyer would—to expose weaknesses or to prove a point—ask questions that help people sort through their opinions. If you disagree with a person, express that as a statement rather than a question. Then ask questions that invite the person to clarify their thinking, or explain how they arrived at their point of view, or share why they take that stance among all the possible positions.

People often express an opinion before they have thought it through completely. While articulating an opinion or belief, a person may change their mind, consciously or subconsciously, because of their dissatisfaction with their own answer. This is especially true for individuals who process their thoughts out loud. By avoiding poor practices and asking good questions you may draw them out, not shut them down.

**6 PRACTICE ::** Share your answer to the question, “Where have you seen God act in your life lately?” Share a specific instance that showed you God’s presence, not just vague blessings like health or food on the table.

Practice asking one or two follow-up questions before moving on to the next person. Remember the characteristics of good questions and practices to avoid.

## PRACTICE ON YOUR OWN

Pick one of the characteristics of good questions to practice every day this week. Note what effect that characteristic has on conversations. Also choose one of the practices to avoid, and watch for it in conversations around you this week. Note what effect that practice has on conversations.

## GETTING THE BIG IDEA

Good questions flow out of genuine interest and prompt people to tell their stories. Rather than being formulaic or leading, they're open-ended, promote conversation, and help people feel that you care about them.

## RESOURCES TO CHECK OUT

- *All That Jesus Asks: How His Questions Can Teach and Transform Us* by Stan Guthrie (Baker)
- *The God Questions: Exploring Life's Great Questions About God* by Hal Seed (Outreach Publishers)
- *Listening Is an Act of Love: A Celebration of American Life from the StoryCorps Project* by Dave Isay (Penguin Press)
- "Asking Questions Like Jesus," blog post by Pastor James Faris: <http://gentlereformation.org/2012/10/03/asking-questions-like-jesus/>

## QPlace STORY

One year in February, three friends, David, Jeff, and John, began meeting with a handful of guys. The guys knew what they were in for: spiritual questions. A "Q" Place. It started very low key, with no agenda except to have the chance to talk about the really important things in life without anyone saying you were right or wrong.

At the first meeting, the friends asked, "If you could ask God one question and you knew he would answer you, what would you ask him?"

Phil answered first: "Why couldn't you have made things more clear?" The other three simply listened with curiosity to Phil's reasons for asking that question. Then the others opened up and questions poured out.

A year later, they were still at it. Even though they were not too sure yet about the Bible, they were becoming hungry to discover answers to their questions. At the end of one of the meetings, Jeff asked everyone, "What's the offer Jesus makes?"

The next time they met, Paul came with a printed copy of a Google-generated gospel explanation—from Chuck Swindoll! Paul plopped his paper down on the table, pointed to two "foreign" words mentioned in the explanation, and asked John what "substitutionary atonement" meant. Clearly, he was seeking an answer. With a quick prayer, John briefly explained the meaning of those two words, and then Paul remarked in amazement that he'd never heard that before. If they hadn't started asking good questions, Paul may never have been open to the gospel message.



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4. In Sunday school classes and a variety of church-based discipleship groups



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**Q Place empowers Christians to engage in meaningful conversations about God with people who believe differently.**