

Practicing the 9 Arts of
**Spiritual
Conversations**



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Practicing the 9 Arts of Spiritual Conversations: Primer
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Cover design: Jennifer Dillon
Third printing 2017
Printed in the United States of America
ISBN 978-1-880266-81-6



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WHY
CULTIVATE THESE
PRACTICES?

The 9 Arts

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*?

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.”¹ *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.”²

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 invited³

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

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

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

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.”⁴ The results from this combined data tell us that 73% of non-Christians are virtually ignored, while 90% of Christians remain inactive.

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.

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.”⁵ 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 meaningful conversations about God as he is revealed in the Bible.

⁴Barna, 111.

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

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.

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* (Little, Brown and Company, 2000), 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?

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?

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?



ASSESS

How satisfied are you with how well you practice the 9 Arts? Perform your own 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?

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 whom 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 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, 2006)
- “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, 2000)
- “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, 2006)
- *Building a Contagious Church* by Mark Mittelberg (Zondervan, 2001)

Place **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, 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.