

How to Start and Maintain Spiritual Conversations Without Being a Jerk

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Grace Lutheran Church,
Washington, D.C.**

**Workshop Presenter:
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www.redeemerchicago.com**

How to Start and Maintain Spiritual Conversations Without Being a Jerk

We all know *that* we're called to reach out and build relationships with those outside the church. Problem is, most of us don't know *how* to actually do that without feeling extremely awkward or, even worse, being a jerk about it. This workshop is specially designed to give you practical tips, helpful techniques, and a simple process to ease you through the inevitable awkward stage with others so that you can start and maintain spiritual conversations that are meaningful, effective, and loving.

In this two-hour workshop we'll learn about and begin to practice the following...

Recalibrating our emotional mindset about spiritual conversations

- From the Comfort Zone through the Awkward Zone and Beyond

Reimagining who we're trying to reach

- The "Customer" Profile
- The Modified Engel Scale
- The Move Spiritual Continuum

Reframing what evangelism is all about

- StoryBrand – they're the hero, we're the guide
- Discipleship funnel vs. personal path
- Evangelism as initial spiritual guidance

Three simple steps to starting a conversation with anyone

How to test the waters to see if someone is receptive to spiritual conversations

- Person of Peace
- Finding the handle

How to ask questions that surface a person's spiritual story

- Ask questions using gospel filters

Four key diagnostic questions you can use to *sustain* a spiritual conversation

- Self-assessment, goal, obstacles, offer to help with next step

From the Comfort Zone through the Awkward Zone and Beyond

Social interactions, especially with people we don't know well, are always tinged or fraught with a certain amount of awkwardness. This is inevitable and unavoidable. To either initiate or deepen relationships, we need to leave our comfort zone, press through the awkward zone, and find what's on the other side. There's an emotional cost to pay, and it's up to the followers of Jesus (us) to be gracious and generous and pay the awkward bill.

These days, following Jesus' command and invitation to reach out to those outside the faith means that we run the risk of amping up the awkwardness by breaking three social conventions...

1. Don't talk to strangers.
2. Don't push people on what's true.
3. Don't do things that make you unhappy.

Recalibrating our emotional mindset about spiritual conversations

(taken from Beyond Awkward by Beau Crosetto, p. 47)

When prompted, jot down your feelings...

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.
- 7.
- 8.

What do you notice about the pattern of your feelings?

Any surprises? Any insights?

Philip and the Ethiopian (Acts 8:26-40)

Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, “Go south to the road – the desert road – that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.” So he started out, and on his way he met an Ethiopian eunuch, an important official in charge of all the treasury of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians. This man had gone to Jerusalem to worship, and on his way home was sitting in his chariot reading the book of Isaiah the prophet. The Spirit told Philip, “Go to that chariot and stay near it.”

Then Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. “Do you understand what you are reading?” Philip asked.

“How can I,” he said, “unless someone explains it to me?” So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him.

The eunuch was reading this passage of Scripture:

“He was led like a sheep to the slaughter,
and as a lamb before the shearer is silent,
so he did not open his mouth.

In his humiliation he was deprived of justice.
Who can speak of his descendants?
For his life was taken from the earth.”

The eunuch asked Philip, “Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?” Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus.

As they traveled along the road, they came to some water and the eunuch said, “Look, here is water. Why shouldn’t I be baptized?” And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized him. When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord suddenly took Philip away, and the eunuch did not see him again, but went on his way rejoicing. Philip, however, appeared at Azotus and traveled about, preaching the gospel in all the towns until he reached Caesarea.

1. *Who are the three characters in this story?*
2. *Who is doing what?*

Reimagining who we're trying to reach

Who has God put on your path and in your heart?

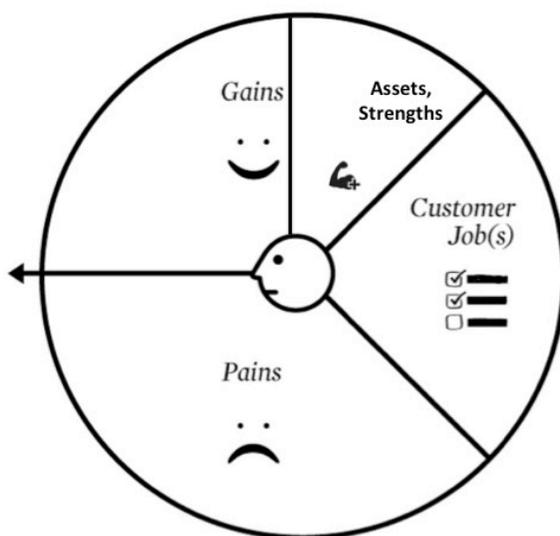
Think about the person/people who are already (or who could be) on your BLESS card. Discover the core of your passion and hope by reflecting more deeply on the people God has surrounded you with and called you to reach out to.

Jot down their name(s) here _____

Three tools to help you visualize and understand the people you want to BLESS

Tool #1 The Customer Profile

Originally taken from the business world, but now also used by the non-profit world, the customer profile is our mental map of what we think someone is like, our visualization of their priorities, what they really care about, what motivates them, what they dream about, what's important or insignificant, and what they might be willing to do with us. There are four major aspects that we can take note of: their "jobs," their pains, their gains, and their strengths.



1. What are the **Jobs**, the things these folks are trying to get done in their lives, as expressed in their own words? What are the problems they're trying to solve? What are the needs (physical, emotional, social, spiritual) they're trying to satisfy?

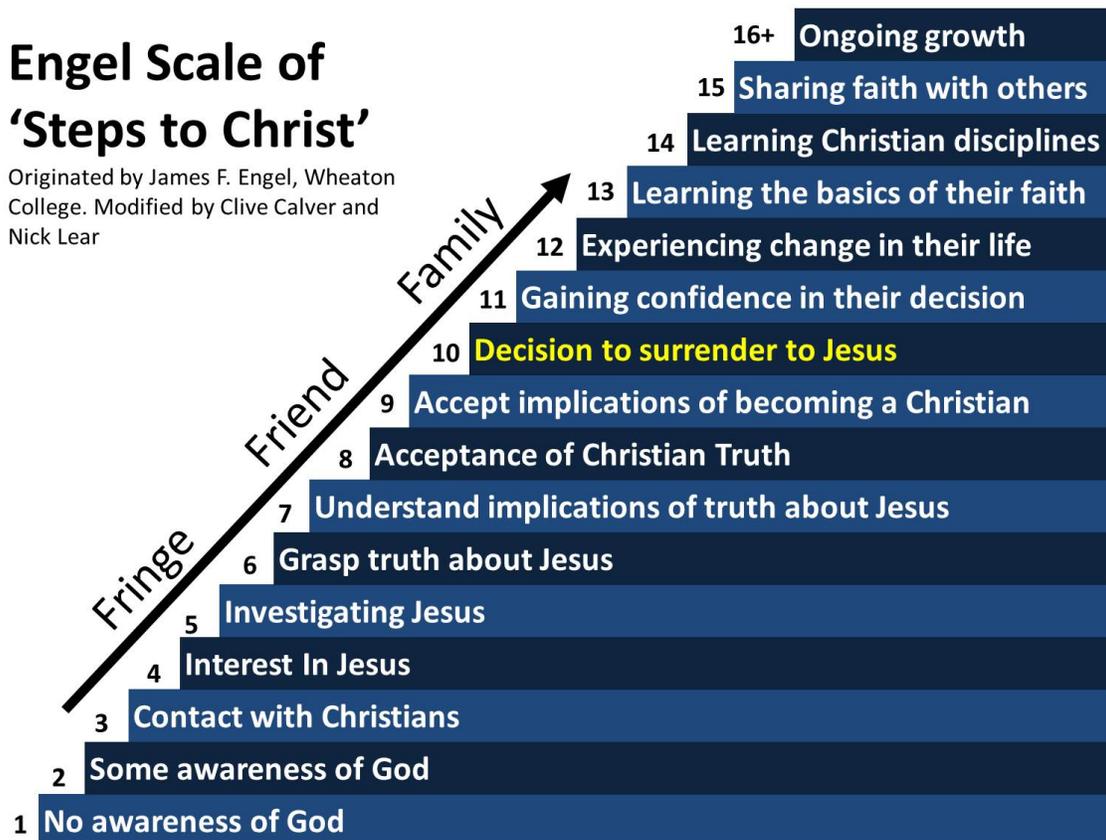
2. What are the **Pains**, the bad outcomes, risks, and obstacles related to their experience? What's worrying for them? What's problematic? What's getting in the way? What's merely annoying, and what's creating deep anxiety?

3. What are the **Gains**, the outcomes they want to achieve, the concrete benefits they're seeking? Sometimes these gains are something they require or expect. Sometimes there are gains they wouldn't have been expecting – a kind of bonus. What do they dream about but think they'll never be given? What do they aspire to?

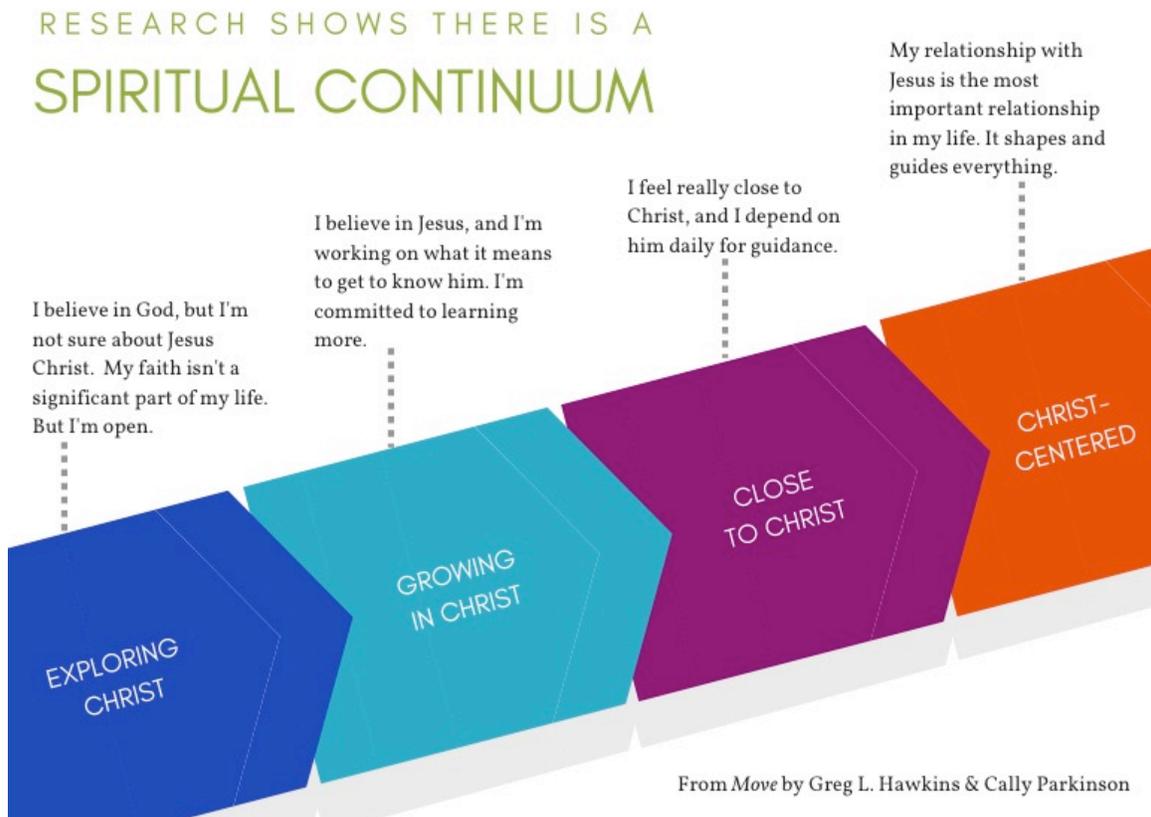
4. What are the **Assets and Strengths** they bring? What strengths and gifts and skills does this group of people bring to us? What value do they add? What gaps do they fill? What wounds and pains do they heal? What jobs can they uniquely do? What makes them not just a customer or a client but a needed part of the body of Christ and an essential family member?

Tool #2 The Engel Scale of Evangelism

This is one well-known helpful way of visualizing a person's relationship with Christ that's much more nuanced than religious/secular or spiritual but not religious.



Tool #3 The Move Spiritual Continuum



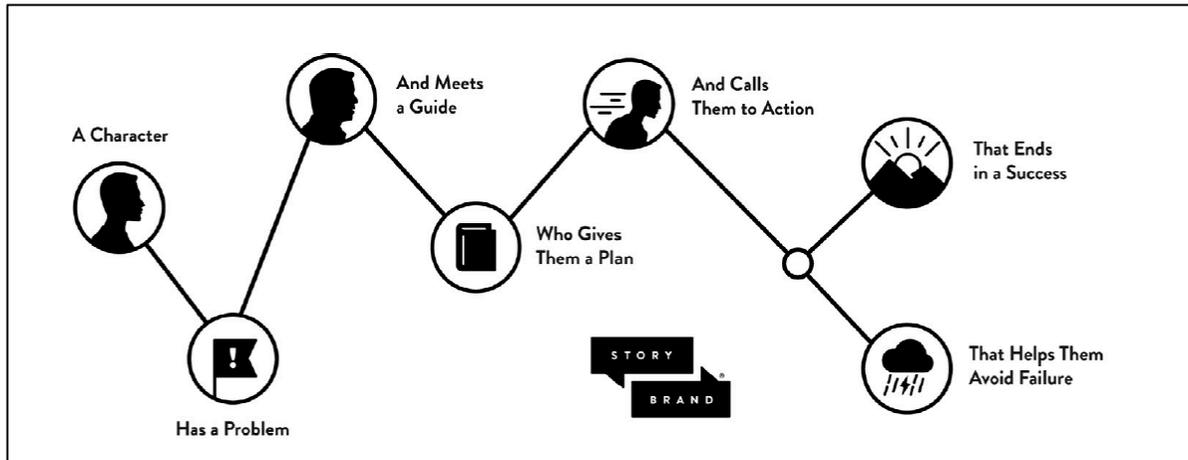
EXERCISE: Using the three tools, take a few minutes to write a description of someone on your BLESS card. What's your instinct about the **jobs** you think they're looking to get done, the **pains** they're facing, the **gains** they'd love to see, and the **strengths** they'd like to bring to and share with you? At the same time, ask yourself where you think they are on either the **Engel Scale** or the **Move Spiritual Continuum**. What's your hunch about what these people might want/desire/pray for in their own spiritual life and in a church community?

FEEDBACK: What are you seeing? How easy or difficult was this to do?
How well do you think you really know your people?
What more do you need to know?
Who could help you understand them better?

Reframing what evangelism is all about

StoryBrand for Your Church

Based on *Building a StoryBrand*, by Donald Miller



1. The Key to Being Seen, Heard, and Understood

If we position ourselves and our church as anything but an aid in helping people survive, thrive, be accepted, find love, achieve an aspirational identity, or bond with a tribe that will defend them physically and socially, good luck engaging with them. People have questions burning inside them, and if we aren't answering those questions, they'll move on to some other source to find meaning. If we haven't identified what people want, what problem we are helping them solve, and what life will look like after they engage with us, we will be seen to be boring, irrelevant, and untrue. The fact is, most of our websites and our messages and our invitations are unclear and non-engaging.

2. The Secret Weapon that Will Engage People and Grow Your Church

We need to pass the caveman's grunt test.

(1) What do you offer? (2) How will it make my life better? (3) What do I need to do to buy it? "You sell headache medicine, me feel better fast, me get it at Walgreens."

3. The Simple StoryBrand Framework

1. *A Character* (the other person is the hero, not our church). The catalyst for any story is that the hero wants something.

2. *Has a Problem* (people seek solutions to internal problems). There are three levels of problems people encounter (external, internal, and philosophical), and they are much more motivated to resolve their inner frustrations.

3. *And Meets a Guide* (people aren't looking for another hero; they're looking for a guide). Every human being wakes up each morning and sees the world through the lens of a protagonist. If we position ourselves as the hero, they remain distant. They are looking for guides to help them win the day.

4. *Who Gives Them a Plan* (people trust a guide who has a plan). They are looking for a clear path that takes away confusion. They are looking for a philosophy they can embody or a series of steps they can take to solve their problems.

5. *And Calls Them to Action* (people do not take action unless they are challenged to take action). This challenge comes from an outside force. A call to action involves communicating a clear and direct step someone can take to address and overcome their problem and return to a peaceful life. Calls can be direct or transitional. Until we call others to action, they simply watch us, but when we call them to action (the right way), they will engage.

6. *That Helps Them Avoid Failure* (every human being is trying to avoid a tragic ending). If there is nothing at stake in a story, there is no story. Simply put, we must show people the cost of not engaging with us. Help people avoid negativity in their life.

7. *And Ends in Success* (never assume that people understand how Christ can change their lives; tell them). Everybody wants to be taken somewhere. If we don't tell people where we're taking them, they'll look elsewhere to find the abundant life that only Christ can supply. Offer a vision for how great their life could be if they engage.

Using the StoryBrand approach, we could follow the **Empathy-Problem-Aspiration-Plan-Promise-Action Step** model

Empathy: *I know how it feels to...*

Problem: *...just go through the motions.*

Aspiration: *I want you to know that you're meant for so much more.*

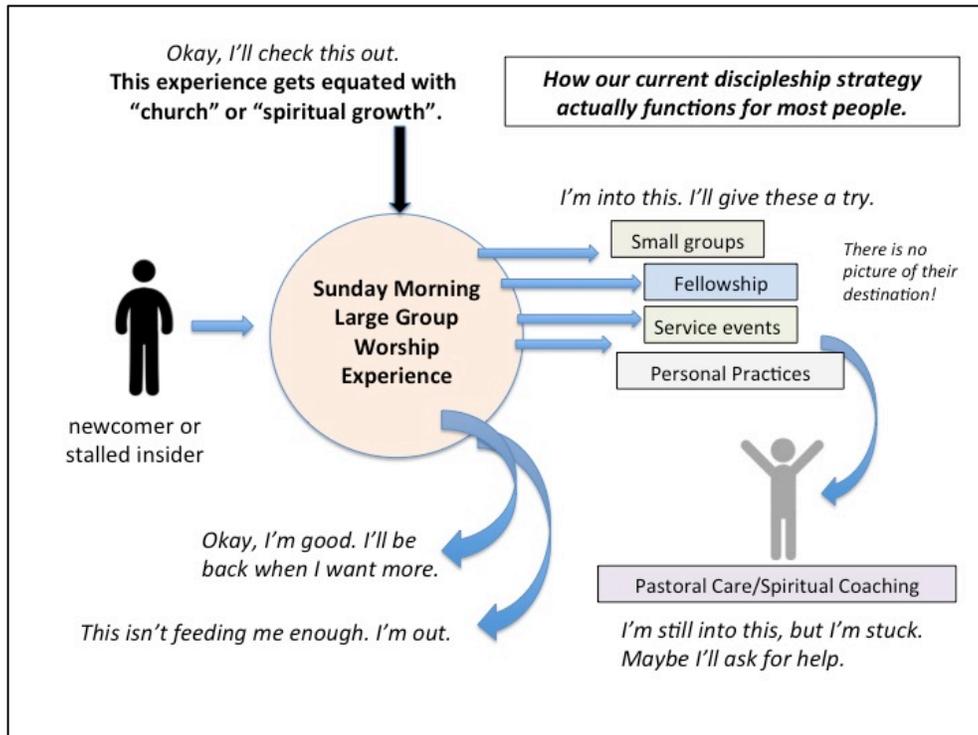
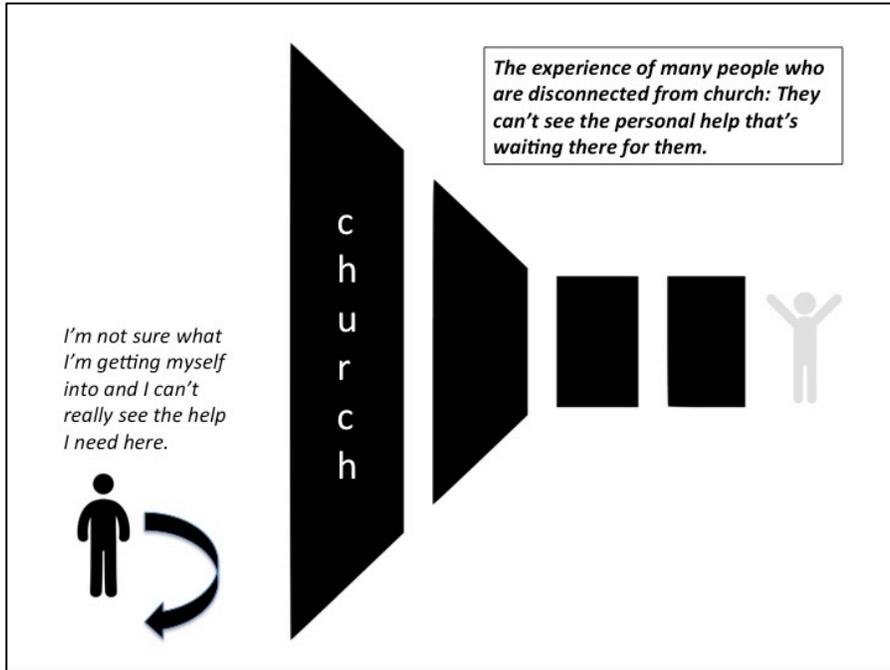
Plan: *I have some resources that help people like us find significance in our lives.*

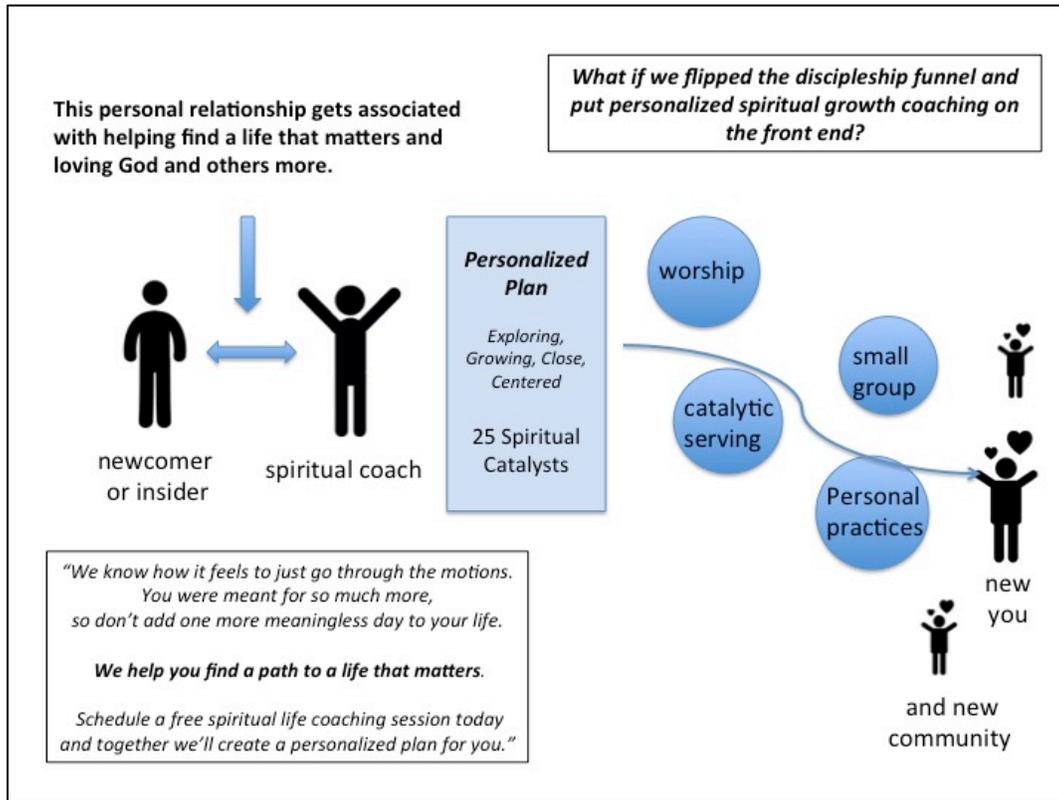
Promise: *I'd be honored to help you find a personal path and take the next steps to a life that matters.*

Action Step: *Don't waste another day. Let's find a time to sit down and talk this through some more.*

The Discipleship Funnel

The StoryBrand framework helps us reframe ourselves and our church as the guide and not the hero. The **“discipleship funnel”** is a way to reframe what it is we’re reaching out and inviting (and guiding) people into. Instead of “selling” people on the merits of our church’s Sunday morning experience, what if we offered to guide them on a personal path to the “new them” (their new identity in Christ)?





Evangelism as initial spiritual guidance

The Christian author Ben Campbell Johnson makes the very helpful insight that spiritual direction refers to guiding persons on their journey of faith, and evangelism is helping them begin it. This hybrid approach has four key aspects.

Discernment. Discerning the presence of Christ in another. Tools are simple, basic questions and a listening ear. This pre-evangelism marks the beginning point of spiritual guidance. The story of the other person provides both the context and the agenda of the guide.

Witness: The next task is to witness either through a personal vignette or a statement of the gospel. The witness acts as a bridge or connecting point with the body of Christ. The witness includes a witness to the human condition, the grace of God, and an invitation to respond in faith.

Host. The host issues personal invitations to guests, receives them when they arrive, introduces them, and leads them to refreshment. We are the bridge to new community.

Model. Some aspects of the Christian life cannot be reduced to words and descriptions: they must be demonstrated. There is a role for imitation. When modeled by the guide, this responsibility does not come as a new law or a requirement for salvation, but rather as a practical demonstration of how the Christian lives.

Three simple steps to starting a conversation with anyone

For most of us (introvert and extrovert alike) once we're deep into a conversation, awkwardness can dissipate and things can just seem to flow naturally. Our real discomfort is at the beginning, in initiating a conversation. The good news is that there are some simple tips and steps we can take that can dramatically increase the likelihood that we can start conversations with all kinds of people in all kinds of situations.

Video "3 Steps to Starting a Conversation with Anyone, Anytime" on YouTube:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4rB33qkDeFg>

Key takeaways:

- 1) When you first initiate a conversation, the specific words you say don't matter that much. What is key is that you make strong eye contact and use strong tonality to signal that you're committed to the conversation. Act a little bit more familiar and engaging than you would normally think to. That reduces the stress and awkwardness that's inherent whenever we meet someone new. It signals to the other person that the conversation has started.
- 2) Make an observation about something in the environment around you that leads to an open-ended question about it. This directs both of you to something you have in common and gives the other person something to say in answer to your question.
- 3) Take what they say and pick up any possible conversational threads that they give you. You can pick up on the one that you know something about, allowing you to talk about your own experience. You can ask another follow-up question from there.
- 4) Remember, in social situations, people want to talk and be social.
- 5) Brainstorm places and situations where you can practice this.
- 6) Get contact information! This allows you to keep the relational momentum going.

EXERCISE: Partner up with someone you don't know and practice starting a conversation. After two minutes, switch partners, making sure that everyone gets an opportunity to experience both sides.

Now that you're talking, how can you "test the handle" to see if someone is receptive to *spiritual* conversations?

One of the biggest challenges we face is finding natural and effective ways to bridge conversations from everyday topics to more significant spiritual conversations. What can we do to find out if the people we talk to are willing to make this shift? One way to think about it is to think about the *Person of Peace Principle*. Based on Jesus' instructions in Luke 10, this teaching can not only shift our initial focus of evangelism, it can exponentially open up many more spiritual conversations as these people join us in mission.

[Jesus said] "Whatever house you enter, first say, 'Peace to this house!' And if anyone is there who shares in peace, your peace will rest on that person; but if not, it will return to you. ~*Luke 10:5-6*

Key things to look for in a potential "person of peace":

- 1) Do they receive you openly into their lives knowing you are a follower of Jesus?
- 2) Are they open to spiritual conversations? Can you talk to them about spiritual issues without them shutting down emotionally?
- 3) Are they willing to look into the Scriptures with a curious spirit and not a critical one?
- 4) Do they have influence with others? Is their home a hub of activity for the neighborhood and extended family?
- 5) Do they have the ability to introduce new people into their sphere of influence effectively?
- 6) Do they have a natural ability to include and bring others to small groups, events, or worship services?

When you find people like this, what is the "Peace to this house" greeting, statement or question for your specific cultural context? What questions can you ask that might "test the handle" to see if they might be willing to enter more deeply into spiritual conversation? How can you gently check their spiritual curiosity pulse?

For example,

- "May I pray for you and your family?"
- "Do you believe people are on a spiritual journey?" If they say yes, that might open the door to sharing what your own spiritual journey has been like in relationship to Jesus.
- Where do you think God might be in all this?

EXERCISE: Partner up with a few others and come up with 3-5 questions that you would be willing to use to "test the handle."

How to ask questions that surface a person's spiritual story

Getting people talking about themselves is key to discovering God's work in their lives. As the details of a person's life are multiplied, *keep the central task in mind – to help the other person become aware of God and to respond in obedient faith to this divine presence.* Five common attitudes block people's consciousness of God: self-pity, self-sufficiency, low self-esteem, self-delusion, and self-will.

Ask questions using “gospel filters.”

The filter of creation strains out of their story “what has made the person the way he or she is.” *The filter of the fall* separates out those parts of a person's story that reveal brokenness, emptiness, or alienation – evidences of estrangement from God. “Where are the broken places in this person's life?” *The filter of reconciliation* seeks to capture those elements of grace that suggest God's healing work in someone's life.

Creation questions

Could you tell me a little about yourself?

What are some of your earliest memories of good times?

Have you lived in many places?

What was life like for you when you were growing up?

Who were the people you most admired in your adolescence?

Other possible questions...

Fall questions

Do you ever think about the meaning of your life?

Are there times when your life just doesn't seem to have any meaning to you?

I find myself wondering, do you have the same kinds of struggles I do?

Would you be willing to share what you feel your greatest need is?

Other possible questions...

Reconciliation questions

Have there been times in your life when God seemed very near?

Have there been times when you prayed seriously?

Do you think God may have been involved in... (whatever they just described)?

Could there be something more than chance involved in that?

Other possible questions...

EXERCISE: Partner up with someone you don't already know and ask some “gospel filter” questions. See if you can transition from Creation to Fall to Reconciliation. Listen and share as you feel led by the Holy Spirit.

Four key diagnostic questions you can use to *sustain* a spiritual conversation

As you engage in a spiritual conversation, remember to secure permission to go deeper. When you ask for permission, you are communicating to them that you value their privacy and time and that you are not pushing your agenda on them but seeking to serve them. Ways to ask for permission include saying things like:

- Do you have time to explore the topic more in-depth?
- My own spiritual journey was an eye-opening experience. Do you have a minute for me to give you the Cliff Notes version?
- Could I send you an article on this subject that I've found helpful? It might be helpful in giving you another way to look at things.

Four key diagnostic questions you can use to *sustain* the spiritual conversation

1. I'm curious, where would you say you are now on your spiritual journey? Use the Move Spiritual Continuum or design a spectrum of your own and have people mark where they'd place themselves. This allows them to describe themselves instead of you assessing them. You can probe why they see themselves that way.

2. Where would you like to be on your spiritual journey in six months to a year? This gets them thinking about a potential spiritual goal and taps into their level of motivation for a changed life.

3. What do you think is standing between you and that goal? What are the barriers? They may say things like... *I'm pretty satisfied with where I am right now. My lack of Bible knowledge. My own misconceptions. I had a bad experience with other Christians. My past. God can't forgive me.* These sorts of responses offer you scope to listen carefully, empathize, apologize for what they experienced, or offer encouragement.

4. What do you think it would take for you to remove those barriers? Or: What possible steps might help you get moving? Or: How can I help you take the next step?

EXERCISE: Partner up with someone and, using the Move Spiritual Continuum on page 7, try using the four questions above and see what happens.

Some Helpful Resources

Crosetto, Beau. *Beyond Awkward: When Talking About Jesus is Outside Your Comfort Zone*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014. Helpful and easy to read.

Johnson, Ben Campbell. *Speaking of God: Evangelism as Initial Spiritual Guidance*. Louisville: Westminster Press, 1991. Extremely thoughtful and helpful approach that weds the practice of evangelism and spiritual direction.

Parkinson, Cally and Greg Hawkins. *Move: What 1,000 Churches Reveal About Spiritual Growth*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011. Research-based study that explores how to measure spiritual growth in people and what actually works to help people move along a spiritual continuum of increasing Christ-likeness.

Rohrmayer, Gary. *Spiritual Conversations: Creating and Sustaining Them Without Being a Jerk*. Church Smart Resources, 2010. Brief, helpful, and straightforward.

Schaller, Mary and John Crilly. *The 9 Arts of Spiritual Conversations: Walking Alongside People Who Believe Differently*. Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale, 2016. Written by the folks who created Q Place, this book builds off of nine different ways that Jesus engaged with people and suggests practices that we can cultivate to engage in honest and open spiritual conversations.