

The Gospel of John and Reclaiming Conversation in 21st Century Evangelism

Introduction

The landscape of the digital age has changed human interaction. The dynamics of interpersonal contact have been reshaped by the variety of electronic devices that we employ. This inevitably impacts the in-the-flesh encounters that we have as human beings. It affects how we relate to one another and changes the role of the most basic aspect of human interaction, the conversation.

In her book *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age*, Sherry Turkle, (Professor of Social Studies of Science and Technology at MIT) explores the consequences of modern technology on human conversation. In the introduction she writes:

Face-to-face conversation is the most human—and humanizing—thing we do. Fully present to one another, we learn to listen. It's where we develop the capacity for empathy. It's where we experience the joy of being heard, of being understood. And conversation advances self-reflection, the conversations with ourselves that are the cornerstone of early development and continue throughout our life.¹

This reality is in the throes of challenge and change in these digital times. However, as Turkle argues in her book, conversation is so intrinsic to the human experience that the loss of it inevitably creates a desire for it. This provides a provocative opportunity for Christian evangelism as it opens a space for the church to embrace its counter-cultural roots and help lead the way in reclaiming conversation and all of its significance in the forming of human society and relationships.

The fullness of this opportunity is rooted in the centrality of conversation to human connection and the construction of meaning and identity in people's lives. Though the gospel can be shared in many ways, personal conversation has been at the core of mission and evangelism since the first century. The ministry of Jesus in the Gospel of John is a particularly clear example of this. Of course, the landscape of the first century stands in stark contrast to the digital age. Can

the way Jesus used conversation, as depicted in John's Gospel, really provide insight into how the church can employ conversation, in an increasingly non-conversational age?

The following exploration of Jesus' conversations with others in the Gospel of John will demonstrate how conversation is used to invite people into a greater knowledge of who Christ is and who they are as a result. Further, due to the fact that conversation remains an integral, though currently diminishing part of social interaction in our contemporary society, we will consider how the theme of conversation and identity in the Gospel of John offers implications for contemporary evangelism. Finally, we will seek to offer the idea that a focus on conversation in evangelism, while increasingly counter-cultural, is in keeping with the counter-cultural nature of the gospel and the ministry of Jesus to invite others into relationship and into participation in the hope that he embodied.

It is well known that the Gospel of John is distinct among the four gospels. There are a number of features that set John's Gospel apart from the three synoptic Gospels. Aside from differences in Christology, events, and the use of dualistic speech patterns; John's Gospel also contains extended dialogues throughout, which differs from the dialogues presented in the other canonical gospels. According to Warren Carter, the Gospel of John is an ancient revelatory biography, as it contains a chronological sequence of events that include dialogue with Jesus as its main characteristic.² One can scarcely read a single chapter without finding dialogue between Jesus and another person. Conversation is a key feature in John's Gospel and the numerous conversations in the fourth Gospel offer a valuable lesson in evangelism to the contemporary church. The conversations that are recorded in the Gospel of John frequently bring the identity of Christ front and center. While highlighting the identity of Christ, these conversations also offer a point of reflection for the individuals in the Gospel who are the subjects of these conversations. Those whom Jesus engages in conversation are invited to consider their identity in light of Christ

and his message. Ultimately these interactions accomplish the fundamental goal of John's Gospel, which is to elicit faith and belief in Jesus Christ on the part of the reader (John 20:31).

For the purposes of this article, a conversation will be defined as two or more verbal interactions in which Jesus speaks and someone responds, or vice versa. Analyzing every conversation in the fourth Gospel is beyond the scope of this article, so for the sake of brevity the following conversations will be explored as they offer a representation of the various kinds of people Jesus encounters throughout John's narrative: Jesus and the disciples, Jesus and Nicodemus, Jesus and the Samaritan woman, and Jesus and Pilate. The disciples represent those who engage with Jesus and respond favorably, Nicodemus presents an encounter with a Jewish religious leader, the Samaritan woman is someone outside of the Jewish sphere, and Pilate represents Roman power. While this is not an exhaustive list of the kinds of people Jesus engages in John, it does offer some kind of representative diversity in his conversation partners throughout the Gospel.

Conversation as an Invitation to "Come and See"

Before the first conversation takes place in the Gospel of John the reader finds a 14-verse prologue that introduces and establishes Jesus in relation to the Father and Creation (John 1:1-4).³ As the author's account of Jesus' ministry continues to unfold the reader begins to see the ideas presented in the prologue come into clearer focus.⁴ As the identity of Christ comes into view through the conversations that take place throughout the gospel account the reader is drawn back to this passage. The author provides the answer to the question of Jesus' identity in the prologue of his gospel.⁵ From this prologue the reader continues into the rest of the gospel knowing that Jesus is the *logos* (John 1:1), he is the creator (John 1:3), he is the light (John 1:4-5), he is the Son, (John 1:14) and he is the incarnation of the Father (John 1:14). What is also vital to recognize in this passage is the designation given to those who believe – children of God (John 1:12).⁶ The

believers' identity is tied to Christ's, and Christ is where true life is to be found. Having established this text as the basis of the author's proclamation of who Christ is, we can now move to an examination of Jesus' dialogue with others.

The very first recorded words that Jesus speaks in the Gospel of John come in the form of a question.⁷ In John 1:38-42 when two of John the Baptist's disciples hear John saying "Look, the Lamb of God!" (John 1:36) they follow after Jesus. In response, Jesus turns around and asks them this question, "What do you want?" (John 1:38). Their response seems somewhat guarded, "where are you staying?" (John 1:38) perhaps suggesting curiosity as though they were yet unsure what to make of Jesus.⁸ Jesus' response is invitational, "Come, and you will see," (John 1:39). The way that Jesus responds is significant because rather than answering a logistical question with a simple, straightforward answer he answers the deeper question that the two men are asking concerning their desire to know more about Him. Jesus invites them to come along and participate in the journey in order to discover the answer for themselves. The implication of Jesus' response is that they would come to understand as they followed.⁹

Similarly, a few verses later in the Gospel account, when Philip calls Nathanael, Philip uses the same words as Jesus, "Come and see," (John 1:46). Another invitation to come and experience Jesus for oneself. Upon meeting Jesus, Nathanael is startled by Jesus' insight into his life. Jesus speaks to the core of Nathanael's character, a man he only just met. Nathanael responds to Jesus by saying, "How do you know me?" (John 1:48). Jesus' response leads to further revelation regarding Nathanael's activities to which Nathanael responds by confessing that Jesus is the Son of God and King of Israel (John 1:49). This event not only tells the reader how the disciples were called, but it adds to the long list of titles describing Christ.¹⁰ This interaction and invitation to "come and see" is the first of many where Jesus' words catch the other person by

surprise, and where the result is further discourse about who Jesus is, and usually who that person is as a result.

The two men who initially approach Jesus and are invited to “come and see” are led to a place of understanding that they are being called to a life of following that will gradually yield a deeper understanding that apprehending spiritual knowledge is a journey akin to the physical birth process. There is an inevitable gestation process that takes place before physical birth. Physical birth takes time, as does spiritual birth.¹¹ Nathanael is offered insight into how his willingness to come and meet Jesus qualifies him as an Israelite “in whom there is no deceit” (1:47).¹² This terminology seems to compare Nathanael to the patriarch Jacob whose dealings with Laban and Esau depict him as a man of “deceit.” Thus, Jesus seems to point to Nathanael as an ideal Israelite seeker. Unlike the patriarch who first bore the name “Israel” Nathanael is a man of noble character who knows enough to pursue knowledge of Jesus. Here again the brief conversation between Nathanael and Jesus yield insights into both Jesus and Nathanael. It also invites the reader to reflect on both sides of this through the preceding conversations.

Conversation as an Invitation to Explore and Redefine Identity

Not only can conversation in the Gospel of John be seen as a theological invitation to “Come and see,” but it can also be understood as an invitation to explore and redefine identity. The conversation arising from Jesus’ encounter with Nicodemus strikes somewhat of a different tone than the calling of Nathanael. Nicodemus makes his appearance at night, coming to Jesus as a wealthy man, a Pharisee, and a respected member of Jewish society.¹³ Nicodemus comes to Jesus presenting what he and the Pharisees know about him (John 3:2). Jesus responds with a statement in the form of a spiritual metaphor concerning the need to be “born again” that seems to answer an unasked question.¹⁴ Nicodemus is unprepared for Jesus’ response and it causes him to ask a follow up question about the impossibility of returning to his mother’s womb (John 3:4). Jesus clarifies

the spiritual significance of his initial metaphor (John 3:5-8) yet Nicodemus remains confused asking, “How can this be?” (John 3:9). This confusion is different from Nicodemus’ initial confusion because, understood in context, Nicodemus’ second question seems to be getting at Jesus’ authority to say such things.¹⁵ This provides Jesus with the opportunity to further clarify his statement while mildly rebuking Nicodemus. This exchange of dialogue represents more than a conversation between two individuals, it also represents a response of the Jews to Jesus, and a clarification of Jesus’ identity. In the end, Nicodemus is unable to grasp Jesus’ identity or his offer and teaching of new life.¹⁶ This is representative of one way that people might respond to Jesus. They may hear but not understand, therefore missing the identity of Christ and thus fail to integrate it with their own narrative, misunderstanding their own identity and need for life as a result.

In direct contrast to the story of Nicodemus, the Samaritan woman at the well offers a different outcome. To begin with, the Samaritan woman is the opposite of Nicodemus.¹⁷ She is unnamed, not wealthy, a woman, not a respected member of society. She belonged to the ‘wrong’ ethnic community, and she encountered Jesus during the day (John 4:9).¹⁸

In this conversation it is Jesus that speaks first. He asks her for a drink of water and she responds in shock (John 4:7-9), because it would have been unheard of for a Jewish man to associate with a Samaritan woman.¹⁹ Jesus replies to her astonishment by declaring that if she knew who it was that asked she would be the one asking for a drink of living water (John 4:10). Jesus introduces another spiritual metaphor here and it results in her confusion and borderline dismissal of His claim (John 4:11-2).²⁰

Seeing that the woman is confused, Jesus further clarifies his statement (John 4:13-4). The woman continues to misunderstand and is unable to move past a literal interpretation of Jesus’ words (John 4:15), so Jesus switches his approach and begins to identify details of her life, thus

demonstrating the divine nature of his identity (John 4:16-8). As Jesus switches his approach the Samaritan woman begins to comprehend who is standing before her offering this gift of living water (John 4:19, 25).²¹ Jesus then identifies Himself as the Messiah (4:26) and the woman's response is to share this newfound knowledge with those in her town (John 4:28).

This action demonstrates a discernible shift in the woman's concept of self. At the beginning of the encounter she is at the well, alone, at an uncommon time. Her seeming social isolation is most likely rooted in her unconventional marital history and current common-law status. Yet, after her encounter with Jesus she is eager to go and engage with her fellow citizens. She enthusiastically invites the townspeople to "come and see" (John 4:29). This conversation incorporates the invitation to "come and see," as well as adding a new invitation to explore and redefine identity. The text implies that Jesus desired that this woman would come to believe that he is the Messiah and that that knowledge would change the way she defined herself.²²

In contrast to Nicodemus, the Samaritan woman comes to accept Jesus' revelation and progresses in her journey to faith.²³ The literary contrast of Nicodemus coming to Jesus in darkness while the Samaritan woman encountered Him during the day is somewhat illustrative of the difference in their comprehension and thus the discovery of Christ's identity and their own.²⁴ The Samaritan woman seemed to eventually grasp the life that Jesus was offering while Nicodemus remained blind to it.²⁵

In addition to conversing with individuals, John's Gospel also presents Jesus talking with groups of people. Two of these groups include his disciples and "the Jews." Although the disciples spend a significant amount of time with Jesus, certainly more than any others, they still frequently misunderstand what he says to them.²⁶ Their misunderstanding serves as a plot function that allows Jesus to expand upon his statements and use the dialogue to reveal more of his identity as the word, life, and light.

One example of such a conversation between Jesus and his disciples is found in John 4:31-38. This takes place right after Jesus encountered the Samaritan woman at the well. The disciples find him and urge Him to eat something (John 4:31), but when they do Jesus responds in a typical fashion by saying something that catches his disciples off guard. Jesus says, “I have food to eat that you know nothing about,” (John 4:32). The disciples misunderstand him and take what he said literally, speculating that perhaps someone brought him food (John 4:33). Jesus then clarifies his statement by explaining that his food is to do the work of the Father who sent him (John 4:34), thus reaffirming his identity as the Son of God.²⁷ Then he speaks of the harvest and the crop of eternal life (John 4:35-38).

This portion of dialogue points to the fact that Jesus has come as the provider of eternal life and reaffirms his identity as the revealer of God’s life-giving purposes.²⁸ It also confirms the disciples’ identity as workers of God sent to reap the harvest (John 4:38). This interaction also follows the typical pattern of conversation previously seen in Jesus’ conversations with Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman; a question, usually followed by a seemingly odd statement, then confusion, clarification, perhaps more confusion, and finally revelation with varying degrees of acceptance.²⁹ This conversational pattern serves the purpose of revealing Jesus’ identity and also helping to reframe or clarify the identity of those he is conversing with.

Conversation as an Invitation to Reflect

The author’s account of the events leading up to Jesus’ crucifixion contain a number of significant conversations. Of particular note are Jesus’ multiple interactions with Pilate. After the Jews brought Jesus to him, Pilate attempts to have the Jews resolve their issues by themselves (John 18:28-31). After being rebuffed by the Jews because they lack the right to execute someone (John 18:31), Pilate returns to Jesus and asks him, “Are you the king of the Jews?” (John 18:33). Jesus responds by asking Pilate about the origin of his question (John 18:34).

The title, “king of the Jews” would have had different meanings for Jews and Gentiles. To Jews the title implied the one who would replace Roman authority, the Messiah, God’s chosen ruler for Israel.³⁰ To Romans the title would have been a threat to Caesar, and referred to a ruler over Palestine.³¹ Jesus wanted to know if Pilate was simply repeating the accusations of the Jewish leaders, or if the insight belonged to Pilate himself.³² Jesus’ question also prepares the way for the following discussion of kingship, as Pilate responds by asking Jesus to explain what he had done to deserve the accusation being mounted against Him (John 18:35).

Jesus replied to this by revealing some of his identity (John 18:36). Again, Jesus makes a transition from physical to spiritual matters in saying that his kingdom is “not of this world” (John 18:36). Pilate pushes Jesus for a confirmation of what he seems to be saying by asking him outright if He is a king (John 18:37). Jesus agrees but expands upon his kingship by saying that he has come to “testify to the truth” (John 18:37). Pilate then leaves the conversation by voicing a significant question: “What is truth?” (John 18:38). In his responses to Pilate, Jesus clarifies and offers revelatory statements concerning his identity as the Christ, the one who testifies to the truth.³³ Pilate left their first encounter not understanding, or perhaps not caring about that which Jesus was trying to communicate.³⁴ Pilate seemed to decline Jesus’ invitation for reflection in an attempt to push for a quick solution to the growing unrest.

In their second conversation Pilate returns to Jesus in fear after hearing the Jews accuse Jesus of claiming to be the Son of God (John 19:7-8). This time Pilate asks Jesus where he is from (John 19:9). With Jesus refusing to answer, Pilate attempts to elicit an answer through an appeal to his power to determine Jesus’ outcome (John 19:10). Jesus finally responds by nullifying Pilate’s argument in saying that Pilate only has what has been given to him from above (John 19:11). Again, Jesus diverts attention to spiritual matters giving Pilate the opportunity to reflect on what Jesus has said. Determining Pilate’s degree of belief is difficult, but it is fairly safe to conclude

that Jesus caused Pilate to consider the case that lay before him. Definite claims concerning Jesus' true identity were made throughout their conversations; however, in the end Pilate seemed unable to fully grasp all that was said.³⁵ Pilate's conversations with Jesus represent conversation as an invitation to reflect on the identity of Christ. Other conversations in John, including the ones considered earlier, teach us that using conversation as a way to invite reflection and response was at the heart of Jesus' evangelistic approach.

Having outlined conversation as an invitation to "come and see," an invitation to explore and redefine identity, and as an invitation to reflect on the identity of Jesus and one's response to it, let us now move to a consideration of the place of conversation in the contemporary evangelistic context.

Conversation in Contemporary Context

It would be naïve to think that the conversational approach taken by Jesus, as depicted in John's Gospel is easily transferable to today. Contemporary and ancient conventions governing conversation, not to mention conversations about religion, are a significant distance apart. However, what is transferable is the principle of conversation as a key feature in contemporary evangelism. Also, we can reimagine how many of the other principles drawn from Jesus' use of conversation in the Gospel of John might be applied in a way that is contextually appropriate for today.

Sherry Turkle, in her book *Reclaiming Conversation* reminds us that we live in a technological universe where we are always communicating, but that is often quite different from actually engaging in conversation. In fact, many of the technologies that we regularly employ keep us away from conversation with one another. Turkle, who is in no way technology averse herself (she has studied digital culture for over thirty years and participates in it enthusiastically) offers the opinion that we are becoming more and more aware of what technology can and cannot do for

us and that the time is right to recapture the life giving potential of conversation.³⁶ Whether Turkle is correct or not (and there is certainly reason to believe that she is), the church has a tremendous opportunity to be a leader in cultivating the art of conversation as a response to the dearth of significant human interaction that many people experience today. Further, we must appreciate the way that conversation, as a counter-cultural initiative can become a key vehicle for gospel conversation and revelation to take place. The following propositions provide a practical framework for thinking about how we can appropriate the art of conversation in evangelistic initiatives.

Attentiveness Through Asking Questions

As we noted in our exploration of John's Gospel, the conversations that Jesus engaged in were shaped by questions; either the ones asked of him or the ones that he asked of others. Conversations are usually led by an initiating question and are fueled by the questions that follow in response to statements that are made by our conversation partners. Good conversations are driven by the curiosity of someone, or more than one person who are truly interested in knowing what others think and why they think it. As Turkle reminds us, "conversation implies something kinetic. It is derived from the words that mean 'to attend to each other, to lean toward each other.'"³⁷ This kind of engagement demands interest that is demonstrated by asking questions that provoke conversational response.

The example of Jesus in John reflects this kind of engagement as he provokes conversation through the use of questions. While his questions may seem curious to us, and perhaps seemed that way to those who were the recipients of them, the evangelistic model is clear. If one is going to engage someone else in a conversation that may lead somewhere then a question, perhaps even a series of them, will be necessary. Questions, in this sense, drive conversation through the pursuit

to know and be known, and so the relationship between conversation, questions and identity is as applicable in our time as it was in the first century.

As the art of conversation is being reshaped by new forms of communication it becomes an increasing challenge to be an initiator of conversation, and thus an asker of questions. Unlike Jesus as presented in the Gospel of John, we do not have to be overly innovative in the questions we ask because the notion of genuine conversation is now somewhat novel itself. Depending on the level of relationship that we find ourselves in, asking simple questions about one's state of being, thoughts on a current event or childhood experience with religion could provoke a conversation that opens up the way for exploration of spiritual truth. The key is the desire to "lean toward" another person and initiate a conversation with a question or two.

This being said, the art of conversation does not require that all questions provoke deep reflection. In fact, most of our conversations take place at a superficial level, but that does not make them unimportant. Author, spiritual theologian, and long-time pastor Eugene Peterson writes about the importance of small talk in his book *The Contemplative Pastor*.

As a pastor, Peterson initially found himself impatient with the mundane conversations that he often had with the people he encountered. However, he later realized that "[I]t is the nature of pastoral life to be attentive to, immersed in, and appreciative of the everyday texture of people's lives."³⁸ This is surely not only sage pastoral wisdom, but insight for the evangelist too. Further, he writes about how he came to understand that engaging in conversation, even daily small talk, typified by the asking and answering of questions, was at the heart of his work of helping people find God. "Most of us, most of the time, are engaged in simple, routine tasks, and small talk is the natural language. If pastors belittle it, we belittle what most people are doing most of the time, and the gospel is misrepresented."³⁹ This captures the importance of the attentiveness and engagement in conversation that is at the heart of the evangelistic enterprise as modeled by Jesus in the Gospel

of John. Asking questions is at the core of attentiveness and conversational engagement. Without it, as Peterson dramatically states, “the gospel is misrepresented.”

Using Unexpected Statements

The repeating theme in Jesus’ conversations with others is that each conversation contains shocking or unexpected statements, and at least some measure of initial confusion on the part of Jesus’ conversation partner. In a world that often does not slow down or take the time to move past routine pleasantries and quick exchanges, the conversations that Jesus had with people can seem a bit odd to the modern reader. In fact, all that one has to do is simply imagine these conversations taking place in their local coffee shop, shopping mall, or grocery store and they would instantly be confronted with the strange nature of these exchanges.

Once again, it would be naïve to think that a direct translation of Jesus’ words and questions should be applied in an evangelistic capacity to today’s conversations. However, the element of surprise may hold something of an opportunity for those seeking to recapture the other-seeking value of conversation. In our fast-paced, technologically driven society where time is money, people simply do not expect to have conversations that deviate from the usual standard. In fact, every person has a schema for social interactions. We have an embedded expectation of how conversations will typically unfold. An example of this is when you meet someone for the first time. You know that you must first learn that person’s name, and then introduce yourself. Then you might ask a question about their occupation if they do not ask you first. You might then inquire about their family or their interests, and so on. There is a typical list of questions that are associated with getting to know someone.

Nicole had an experience recently where she overheard a youth pastor friend of hers having an introductory conversation with someone when they proceeded to ask the other person a deep question about themselves quite early on. Her friend’s tone was somewhat comedic but not so

much so that the recipient of the question could dismiss it. It completely caught the other person off guard and it led to a significant conversation about identity and where they currently saw God at work in their life. Nicole later asked her friend why they would ask such a bold question, and if they often take such risks in such an early stage of a relationship? Their response was “yes.” Nicole’s friend explained that they do this because it throws people off of their routine list of responses and blows past the superficial in order to get at what lies underneath the surface. This friend has taken a note from Jesus’ playbook and was using it successfully.

To be sure, this approach is not neat and tidy. As was already discussed, a hallmark of Jesus’ conversations was confusion, if not sometimes rejection or dismissal. Indeed, there is an underlying pattern in the conversations throughout the Gospel of John: confusion, clarification, and insight. Jesus would make some sort of surprising statement; which was typically met by confusion, and would then offer clarification in response. Sometimes that clarification would lead to insight concerning his identity and what he offered, and would create an opportunity for the listener to accept what was said. Taking the hint from this pattern in the Gospel of John, contemporary evangelistic engagement must put aside the fear of venturing away from the normal realm of conversation and be willing to have a few odd conversations. To do so is once again an act of “leaning toward” another person as an expression of desire to know another person on a more purposeful level.

Conversation as an Invitation to Come and See

The invitation to “come and see” in conversation is atypical for many Christians. The question, “what are we inviting them to come and see?” is a fair one. We may naturally think this entails inviting them to a church service, which may or may not seem like a good idea. However, conversations themselves can be spaces where people can experience something. In the context of

evangelism, a conversation can invite someone to “see” where Jesus is in their lives and get a glimpse of his presence at work in them.

When people encounter the person of Jesus Christ for themselves they are likely to be drawn toward him, so we must learn how to have the kind of conversations that are not simply about passing on information about Jesus, but rather are interested in helping people to “see” Jesus. It can be as simple as finding a place in the conversation to ask who they think Jesus is, what they think about him, even how they define themselves. Better conversations start with better questions. Given the appropriate moment we can ask things like, “what do you desire most in life?” or “Who do you strive to be?” These are big and personal questions, but if we venture into conversations with an attitude of respect and openness, and we are willing to take a risk, then the trajectory of these conversations can lead to unexpected moments of significance that transcend a transmission of content and lead to a deep personal and spiritual connection.

Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch explore the role of experience in evangelism when they suggest that what many “not-yet Christians” need is to experience something transcendent as a part of their journey toward Christ. As conversation invites experience, it may be that our conversation takes place while lying in the grass under a starry sky with our conversation partner, or wandering through an art gallery together.⁴⁰ In these places the possibility to “see” Jesus can be heightened and conversation can take on a new dimension or meaning. The idea that conversation is about the mind alone is limited in its usefulness. Conversation can both invite others into a meaningful experience of Jesus, and can also unfold out of our lived experiences and encounters.

An invitation to “come and see” presents an opportunity in that a person will need to decide what to do with what they have seen and experienced. To witness Jesus, or even a glimpse of him, for oneself is to answer the question of his relevance to one’s life. For some, this may be a welcome opportunity to explore and redefine identity or discover purpose. Although there are

some people that would be reluctant to admit it, as human beings we have a desire to be known and to know where we fit.⁴¹

Some people build walls around this desire for different reasons, but the desire remains within them. People are likely more willing to talk about their life and identity than we anticipate. As they speak we are able to learn more about them and where they are in their journey of faith.⁴²

There is a beautiful representation of this premise that came out of a festival called Burning Man. This yearly, self-described, community gathering in the Nevada desert now draws crowds in the tens of thousands, and is based on 10 principles including radical inclusion, gifting, decommodification, radical self-reliance, radical self-expression, communal effort, civic responsibility, leaving no trace, participation, and immediacy.⁴³ Artist, Alexander Milov created a compelling sculpture at Burning Man that depicts the wire frames of two adults sitting, heads bowed to their knees and arms drawn around themselves, facing back to back.⁴⁴ Within the wire frames are the silhouettes of two children, reaching from within the adults toward each other.⁴⁵

The sculpture is a moving depiction of the innate desire to ‘lean toward’ one another, to know and be known. As the figures of the children in the sculpture illustrate, there is often a guarded longing within each of us to understand our place in the world and how we are to be defined in that place. The process of inviting people to wrestle with this question and exploration can have the latent benefit of not only helping the individual discover things they may not have previously articulated, but it can also challenge us to answer the same questions of ourselves and our own journey of faith.

Conversation as an Invitation to Reflect and Discover

The invitation to reflect in conversation offers the opportunity to think about what one truly believes and where that belief is rooted. In inviting people to reflect in conversation, Christians can offer multiple viewpoints for people to consider. At the same time, Christians must

be open to being the recipients of such questions. As Turkle notes “conversation with others provides rich material for self-reflection.”⁴⁶ The practice of reflection creates grounds for personal growth and discovery. Conversation helps us to learn what we think by listening to ourselves talk.⁴⁷ In this sense conversations that invite inner exploration and examination of faith issues are an act of hospitality as we help people discover themselves more fully.

It can be somewhat difficult and even uncomfortable at times because we may find that more questions are raised than answered. We may not reach a resolution by the end of a conversation and it is possible that we may discover things that we don’t like. However, even in these cases it leaves the door open for future conversations and times for further reflection and self-discovery. This allows our evangelistic efforts to be profound acts of service in which we are not just seeking to convert someone as much as help them, and help ourselves, understand themselves more fully. Elaine Heath, using the writing of Julian of Norwich as an example, writes about the need for people to come to a place of self-discovery as foundational to their finding God. Heath reminds us that holding hope forth to people as they discover themselves, even their brokenness in all its various forms, is what is at the heart of evangelism.⁴⁸

Conversational engagement inevitably provides a vehicle for self-reflection and brings about the possibility of self-discovery. We saw this at work in Jesus’ ministry and conversations with people, as depicted in the Gospel of John. These are great gifts that a conversational approach to evangelism offer to the body of believers today.

Listening

The hospitality of conversational evangelism necessitates the courtesy of deep listening. This has not always been a trait of what would traditionally be deemed “good” evangelistic practice. Largely evangelism has been conceived of as “delivering a message.” This kind of understanding does not place much emphasis on listening as a primary act of the evangelist’s

work. However, in true conversation listening is absolutely necessary if a genuine interchange is going to take place.

Listening is a highly evangelistic act, as it is the way we form relationship and come to understand people's lives and the stories that they tell. Further, in today's climate, where genuine personal engagement is often at a premium, listening is the place where evangelism truly begins to happen. In keeping with the model of Jesus that we explored earlier, "listening is the evangelistic act of genuine presence and authentic relationship that mirrors the incarnational activity of Christ and is the essence of mission."⁴⁹

Could it be that listening is the most evangelistic thing we can do in today's world? Turkle expresses the significance of listening in conversation when she writes, "[T]o converse, you don't just have to perform turn taking, you have to listen to someone else, to read their body, their voice, their tone, and their silences."⁵⁰ This is the act of deep engagement that brings about meaningful interchange between human beings and sets the table for any kind of positive exchange. It is at the very core of evangelism today. As already noted, the act of listening to someone is itself an evangelistic act of incarnation. Listening, truly listening, to someone is a gift given. It is not a pre-evangelistic necessity that we must perform prior to sharing the message we want to share. It is a counter-cultural act of hospitality that speaks on its own terms. It is intrinsic to the kind of conversation that facilitates an honest exchange around the ideas of the gospel between two human beings.

Conclusion

"Conversation? It died in 2009." So said a college senior to Sherry Turkle in her research for her book *Reclaiming Conversation*.⁵¹ This sobering statement reminds us of how our social media age is usurping genuine, face-to-face interaction and making the idea of genuine conversation something that people experience less and less. However, could it be that the other

side of this is that the lack of conversation creates a desire for it? If so, then the ancient example of Jesus as he is presented through the Gospel of John yields critical insight for the practice of evangelism in contemporary culture.

Conversation remains essential for relationships, so it is no surprise that conversation must be a key element of evangelism today. The model that Jesus provides is generative to our contemporary thinking about how conversation is not just a tool for evangelism but is at the heart of Jesus' mission. A movement towards initiating conversations of significance is critical to evangelism because it creates the opportunity for people to be known and to know God.

Of course, because initiating conversation is increasingly counter-cultural this involves taking a risk. One might end up being perceived as “weird,” and yet simultaneously end up looking more like Jesus. This too is worth noting from the portrait of Jesus in John's Gospel. Jesus, quite simply, was out of the ordinary, and it captured peoples' attention. Our world is in need of Christians who are bold and confident enough in their faith so that following in the ways of Jesus will produce good fruit. People might just see him when they are talking to us.

Evangelism is a journey. It will entail many, many conversations. As we enter into those conversations with expectant faith, we can anticipate that Jesus will reveal himself to our conversation partners just as he did to his own conversation partners in the first century.

¹ Sherry Turkle, *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age* (New York: Penguin, 2015), 3.

² Warren Carter, *John: Story Teller, Interpreter, Evangelist* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2006), 49-51. Ronald E. Clements and Matthew Black, *New Century Bible Commentary: The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1981), 76.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Clements and Black, *New Century Bible Commentary*, 76.

⁵ Craig R. Koester, *The Word of Life: A Theology of John's Gospel* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 8.

⁶ Jo-Ann A. Brant, *Dialogue and Drama: Elements of Greek Tragedy in the Fourth Gospel* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004), 172.

⁷ Koester, *The Word of Life*, 1.

⁸ Clements and Black, *New Century Bible Commentary*, 113.

⁹ Koester, *The Word of Life*, 172-3.

-
- ¹⁰ John J. Kilgallen, *A Brief Commentary on the Gospel of John* (Lewiston, NY: Mellen Biblical Press, 1992), 18.
- ¹¹ Bruce Milne, *The Bible Speaks Today: The Message of John* (Downers Grove, Ill: Intervarsity, 1993), 58.
- ¹² Some translations use the word “guile” instead of “deceit.” E.g. the NASV.
- ¹³ Cornelius Bennema, *Encountering Jesus: Character Studies in the Gospel of John* (Colorado Springs, Co: Parternoster, 2009), 78; Clements and Black, *New Century Bible Commentary*, 148-9; Christopher Skinner, *Characters and Characterization in the Gospel of John* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 92.
- ¹⁴ Clements and Black, *New Century Bible Commentary*, 150.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid*, 154.
- ¹⁶ Bennema, *Encountering Jesus*, 80.
- ¹⁷ Skinner, *Characters and Characterization*, 26.
- ¹⁸ Carter, *John*, 79.
- ¹⁹ Bennema, *Encountering Jesus*, 87; Clements and Black, *New Century Bible Commentary*, 180-1; Kilgallen, *A Brief Commentary*, 45.
- ²⁰ Bennema, *Encountering Jesus*, 87-8.
- ²¹ *Ibid*, 89; Also, Kilgallen, *A Brief Commentary*, 46.
- ²² *Ibid*, 89-91; Also, Kilgallen, *A Brief Commentary*, 40.
- ²³ *Ibid*, 89-91; Skinner, *Characters and Characterization*, 26. See also Robert Kinast, *If You Only Recognized God's Gift: John's Gospel as an illustration of Theological Reflection* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993), 6.
- ²⁴ Skinner, *Character and Characterization*, 91.
- ²⁵ Carter, *John*, 79.
- ²⁶ Bennema, *Encountering Jesus*, 62, 119.
- ²⁷ Clements and Black, *New Century Bible Commentary*, 194.
- ²⁸ Carter, *John*, 55-6.
- ²⁹ *Ibid*, 114.
- ³⁰ Clements and Black, *New Century Bible Commentary*, 557; Kilgallen, *A Brief Commentary*, 217.
- ³¹ Kilgallen, *A Brief Commentary*, 217.
- ³² Clements and Black, *New Century Bible Commentary*, 558.
- ³³ *Ibid*, 560.
- ³⁴ Kilgallen, *A Brief Commentary*, 218-9.
- ³⁵ Bennema, *Encountering Jesus*, 187; Kilgallen, *A Brief Commentary*, 215; Skinner, *Characters and Characterization*, 33.
- ³⁶ Turkle, *Reclaiming Conversation*, 17.
- ³⁷ *Ibid*, 44.
- ³⁸ Eugene Peterson, *The Contemplative Pastor: Returning to the Art of Spiritual Direction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989), 112.
- ³⁹ *Ibid*, 115.
- ⁴⁰ Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come: Innovation and Mission for the 21st- Century Church* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003), 102.
- ⁴¹ Koester, *The Word of Life*, 53.
- ⁴² Koester, *The Word of Life*, 53.
- ⁴³ <https://burningman.org/culture/philosophical-center/10-principles/>
- ⁴⁴ <http://mymodernmet.com/alexander-milov-love-sculpture/>
- ⁴⁵ *Ibid*.
- ⁴⁶ Turkle, *Reclaiming Conversation*, 10.
- ⁴⁷ *Ibid*, 98.
- ⁴⁸ Elaine Heath, *The Mystic Way of Evangelism: A Contemplative Vision for Christian Outreach* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2008), 47.
- ⁴⁹ Lee Beach, *The Church in Exile: Living in Hope After Christendom* (Downers Grove, Ill: Intervarsity, 2015), 209. Also see Nathan C.P. Frambach, “Practice of Evangelical Listening and Speaking the Faith to Others,” *Currents in Theology and Mission* 38.5 (2011): 358-61.
- ⁵⁰ Turkle, *Reclaiming*, 45.
- ⁵¹ *Ibid*, 137.