

BECOMING EFFECTIVE WITNESSES

5

HOW TO HAVE A CONVERSATION ABOUT JESUS

John 4:4—30

By Elizabeth B. Crawford

“Stimulate. After we have an idea of whom we are talking to, we must seek to arouse their curiosity about the gospel. This is one of the most neglected aspects of evangelism. We try to saturate people with the light before we have caught their attention.... This is part of being ‘fishers of men’ rather than ‘hunters of men’.... Jesus was often deliberately vague and intriguing with people at first, not giving the whole answer until he had their complete interest. He knew the Samaritan woman (Jn. 4:7-42) wouldn’t understand what ‘living water’ meant any more than Nicodemus (Jn. 3:1-21) would comprehend the term ‘born again.’ Here deliberate obscurity was a stimulus and test of their spiritual interest.”

Rebecca Manley Pippert

AIM OF STUDY

- To learn how to initiate a spiritual conversation and move past multiple defenses to reveal Jesus to a seeker.

KEY VERSE

“Jesus answered, ‘Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.’” John 4:13-14

PREPARATION

Read over the notes on “**how to teach the Bible in small group**” and “**some practical suggestions for leading a small group discussion**” in Vineyard Church of Columbus’ *Small Group Leadership Training Manual*. Before you read over the Scripture, pray that God would give you direction for leading your group and teach you something relevant. Then read through the passage and the Bible study below. **You will need to go over the questions and choose which ones you want to emphasize and which you could eliminate if your time is limited.** Note that the application questions are marked with an asterisk (*). Rather than leaving these to the end of the study, ask one or two as you work through the passage so people are being confronted by Scripture’s truths and applying them to their own lives. If you find you are falling behind schedule and need to move ahead, you could summarize some of the passage and then go to the final questions.

These studies contain more background material and information on the passages than any group will cover in a meeting. The authors are providing this for the leaders’ benefit—to help reduce your study and preparation time; to help resource you for possible questions group members may raise; and to clarify some gray areas of doctrine that may be in your mind as you prepare. Obviously we cannot exhaust any one subject in a document like this, so you may want to do further reading and discuss doctrine with your pastor. We highly recommend *The New Bible Dictionary* or *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* as excellent resources for study.

OPENERS

Have you ever wondered how some people find it easy to talk about *spiritual things* while you feel tongue-tied around non-Christians? Many of us want to share our faith—and the rest of us know we should. But not all of us feel at ease opening up about Jesus Christ. How would you describe yourself when you’re talking about the gospel? Is your style:

1. The debater?
2. The preacher?
3. The teacher?
4. The counselor?
5. The interviewer?
6. The stand up comic?
7. The invisible man or woman?

When sharing our faith, both the content and the style play important roles. Jesus was a master of communication. After all, one of his inspired names in Scripture was “the Word” (John 1:1) and he created us to be communicators (Gen. 1:27–28; Col. 1:16). Let’s look at how he engaged an unlikely audience in a fruitful conversation about himself.

Pray together that God’s Spirit would teach you something valuable from His Word.

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

The apostle John wrote this book, although he is never specifically mentioned by name anywhere in the gospel (see John 21:20-24). It is very different in content, style and organization than the other three gospels (accounts of Jesus’ life, known as The Synoptics). John’s facts are historically correct although his order of when events took place may not be precise. He includes no parables, no demon expulsions, only two healings, no story of the infant Jesus, no story of Jesus’ temptation, no Sermon on the Mount, no Transfiguration, and no communion meal instructions. He contrasts Jesus’ conversation with a Pharisee, Nicodemus, with a Samaritan woman of ill repute to show Jesus came to save all kinds of people. John does use poetic language, includes the seven “I am” sayings, and quite long teachings. His purpose for writing this book is found in John 20: 30-31. [Marlene Nathan contributed some of this information.]

STUDY THE PASSAGE: John 4:4-30

Jesus was traveling north towards the area of Galilee. To get there quickly, he could take the road that lead through the region of Samaria. John wrote in verse 9, “Jews do not associate with Samaritans” which was putting it mildly. There had been at least 400 years of hostility between the southern Jews and their Samaritan neighbors to the north. The Samaritans were descendents of mixed marriages between Jews and Assyrians when the Assyrian empire conquered the northern area of Israel in 722 B.C. The Jews looked down on the Samaritans as impure both racially and spiritually. The Samaritans had built their own temple, refusing to worship in Jerusalem, and finally a Jewish priest and governor had burned the Samaritans’ temple in 128 B.C. Because of all the hostility, many pious Jews would travel around the Samaritan region to the east and certainly would not eat or sleep in Samaria.

- 1. Let’s imagine we are filming this story. Read aloud verses 4-8 noting the opening scene. Who are the main characters and how do you picture them? What details can we find about the setting?**

Answers will vary as folks describe Jesus, the Samaritan woman, and the disciples. You may want to explain that the sixth hour means noon, the hottest time of the day, which was not when women usually fetched water. The well seemed to be outside town since the disciples had to leave Jesus there and go into town for food. Note also that this woman was alone, probably hoping to avoid others who might make judgmental remarks about her lifestyle. See vv. 17-18.

2. How did Jesus initiate a conversation with someone very different than himself?

Jesus asked her for a drink when He saw she had come to draw water. He didn't begin right off the bat with a statement or question designed to make her aware of her spiritual need. Like a normal human, He began with His point of need.

3. Optional: Was this a shared need or merely a gimmick to engage her in conversation?

Jesus was genuinely tired and thirsty. There doesn't appear to be any trickery in asking her for water. It was something they had in common and was related to her activity at the well, so it was a logical place to start. As you read the entire passage, you realize He knew that she was thirsty for love. But, as mentioned above, He didn't start a conversation designed to provoke her defenses. She may have already had plenty of walls up, so this was a seemingly human and innocent beginning.

***How do you initiate spiritual conversations?**

4. Read verses 9–12. How did she respond (v. 9)? What barriers were between them?

She seemed startled since they were complete strangers, of the opposite sex, came from different racial and spiritual backgrounds, and probably had radically different upbringings.

5. When she reacted to their differences, how did Jesus bypass them?

He didn't get defensive and offered her a gift instead. How many of us would respond so graciously? This is so revealing about the heart of our generous, loving God who has endured many people's indifference or outright hostility. He is the One who is slow to anger (Ex. 34:6). He constantly faced rejection even by His own people, the Jews (John 1:11). Yet He came to reconcile the world to Himself, not counting men's sins against them (2 Cor. 5:19). He freely offered Himself in our place, His perfect life for our sinful lives. It is our role now to extend His gift to others.

6. What did He introduce into to the conversation (v. 10)?

He mentioned the gift of "living water," eternal life (v 14) given when a person places their complete trust in Him. This was something she didn't have but that He was willing to give to meet her spiritual needs. In John 7:38, Jesus again speaks about "living water," referring this time to the Holy Spirit (Morris, p. 260) who is the living God in us. Also, the prophet Jeremiah refers to God as "the spring of living water" in Jer. 2:13 and 17:13 (Morris, p.261).

7. What did the woman's reply reveal she was thinking about (vv. 11-12)?

Her answer was on the physical not spiritual plane, so to her, water was something to meet her physical needs. It's possible she thought Jesus was referring to a source of running water because the normal meaning of "living water" was water that flowed from a river or stream (Morris, p. 260). Also, she may have preferred fresh running water to water sitting in a cistern.

8. What did she take pride in?

She asks Jesus if He is greater than Jacob, the grandson of Abraham. Since Jacob purchased land near Shechem, he was a common ancestor of both the Jews and Samaritans. According to her, Jacob gave this well (or dug it) and drank from it, as did his family and flocks (v. 12). Although it is not mentioned in the Old Testament, Jews, Samaritans, Christians, and Muslims have all called a well in that area "the well of Jacob." It was about 250 feet from the ancient town of Sychar, and can still be seen today (Ewing and Wieand, p. 955). Since Jacob provided such a deep and reliable well, she questioned whether Jesus, not just the water, was superior. This probably came across as quite demeaning.

***What do people take ethnic or spiritual pride in today? Can that be a barrier to the gospel? How?**

9. Read verses 13-15. What images did Jesus continue to speak about (vv. 13-14)?

He referred to "drinking" and "water," linking physical and spiritual thirst. He made a pun on the idea of water welling up or bubbling over, which He meant to symbolize "eternal life."

10. What made Jesus' offer of living water attractive to her (v. 15)?

She assumed that she could avoid this hot and humbling work of going to the well if she no longer got physically thirsty. The job of drawing water was probably worse for her than other women given her reputation (v. 18). She probably went to the well at the time of day when others would be avoiding the hot sun, so that she could avoid judgmental remarks or stares.

***What do people find attractive about religion (or Jesus) today?**

Since we are fallen, self-centered and self-serving people at heart, most of us approach spirituality or Jesus to see what we can find that might meet our needs. Generally, people are looking for help with a difficult relationship, health crisis, financial crisis, etc., rather than seeking to worship and serve the God who made us and deserves our total devotion. The danger of this self-centered approach is that we "try a little religion" like we try a new diet or medication. We want to feel

better, rather than undergo a radical change of heart. Often we are guilty of making a conditional commitment to Jesus, sticking with Him as long as “it works for us.” But when the next crisis arises, and Jesus doesn’t immediately calm the storm, or us, we may be tempted to “dump him” and look for another option. Instead, Jesus wants a total commitment of our whole lives, till death, when we will be fully in His Presence. He’s not offering a casual arrangement of “moving in together” that can be abruptly ended when we pack our bags and walk out.

11. How did Jesus move the conversation from the “material” or “natural” level to “spiritual” or “supernatural” matters? What need was He really offering to meet (v. 14)?

Jesus began referring to her spiritual thirst for love. All of us are created to be loved and to give love. He knew this could only be met in Himself, the God who dwells with us and who loves and accepts us unconditionally.

12. Read verses 16-18. How did Jesus probe the woman’s deeper needs (vv. 16-18)?

He asked her to bring her husband to meet Him. This “innocent” request turned the conversation toward the issue of her brokenness in relationship to men. She seemed to have been searching for a love that would satisfy her deepest longings, but no man could meet those or would stay in a committed relationship with her.

13. How did He know about her past?

Although he may have had Sherlock Holmes’ abilities to detect information, Jesus probably received revelation from His Father in Heaven about this woman’s relational history. See John 5:19-20, 30 and John 12:49-50 where Jesus states that the Father shows or tells Him what to do or say.

***Have you ever experienced a prophetic or revelatory word for a non-Christian? *What happened when you shared it?**

14. Did he condemn her for her promiscuous lifestyle (v. 17)? Why not?

Jesus did not condemn the woman although he did not approve of her actions. He knew no one could live a godly life since all of us are sinners. He came to seek and save the lost, not judge them (Luke 19.10). If he had begun to lecture her about her promiscuity, she certainly would have become defensive and either fought back or shut him out. Although she may have wanted to hide her brokenness, at least she was honest about her marital status, and Jesus commended her for being truthful.

***How should we relate to a non-Christian's sinful behavior?**

We are ambassadors of God's gospel, the good news. We are not called to judge outsiders (1 Cor. 5:12-13), and certainly cannot apply the morals or ethics of the kingdom of God to people who are not part of the kingdom. People without Christ are enslaved to sin (Rom. 6:16-18). Our job is to relate and communicate the love of God to sinful people. We should do so in such an attractive way that they want to find a better life in relationship to Jesus, too. That doesn't mean we have to approve of sinful behavior that our unsaved friends exhibit. If asked what we think about a person's promiscuous lifestyle, addiction, etc., we can share that God wants what is best for us. He tells us that breaking His laws hurts us (Rom. 6:20-21). He loves us enough to want to protect us from destructive behaviors, and therefore warns us about them in His Word. When we are ready to turn control over to Him, He will forgive, cleanse and put His power in us to change our lives (1 John 1:9; Jer. 31:33-34). He will come in as the new manager and help restore our dignity that was made in His image. He offers this change now, but there will come a day when we have to answer for our actions (Acts 17:30-31). If we continue to resist Him, and shut Him out of our lives, He will ultimately shut us out of His Presence forever (Luke 13:22-27). We should pray for the non-Christians we know so that God would pour out repentance (2 Tim. 2:25) on them and they would want to turn their lives around and pursue Jesus. But just like our heavenly Father, we cannot make someone change.

15. Read verses 19-24. How did the woman try to take the focus off her broken, sinful self (vv. 19-20)?

Amazed that Jesus knew this highly personal information about her, she concluded that he had some prophetic gifting. To deflect the conversation from her painful past, she raised a theological controversy that had divided Jews and Samaritans for centuries. She may have hoped this rabbi or prophet would enjoy a religious debate and leave her personal life alone.

16. Optional: Do you think she was using this issue as a smokescreen or was she trying to establish that she was "spiritual" too?

While she tried to avoid the discussion of her sinful self, she may have also wanted to avoid having Jesus look down on her as a lowly sinner by boosting her reputation as someone with spiritual interests, (Carson, p. 222). Either way, pride would have motivated her response.

***In your experience, how do people approach their own sin? Give examples.**

17. Instead of getting caught in an ancient argument, whom did Jesus focus on (vv. 21-24)?

Jesus directed the conversation toward His Father, not spiritual traditions and controversies she refers to when talking about “our fathers” (Morris, p. 269). He knew that true worship was no longer a question of **where** one worshiped but **whom**, (Tasker, p. 77). So, he spoke of the Father, not an earthly location.

18. How did Jesus describe God and those He was seeking (v. 24)?

He used the terms “spirit” and “truth” referring to God’s nature. These terms also describe the worship of those who gain salvation through his Son in whom God’s Spirit and truth were most evident (John 1:14, 17-18). “Spirit” and “truth” may also remind us of truly biblical worship: both our emotions and our minds engaged in adoration.

19. How was Jesus living out this truth right before her eyes?

Jesus was the Way to a right relationship with God. He was also the Truth (John 14:6). His loving interaction with this woman was evidence of God’s search to gain another true worshipper.

20. Read verses 25-26. How did the woman reply and what do you think she meant (v. 25)?

Perhaps she wanted to gain an advantage over Jesus, by speaking of someone greater than this unknown prophet she had just met at the well. When referring to the Messiah, she was thinking of someone the Samaritans believed would be a great teacher, (Carson, p. 226). Therefore she expected he would explain everything. This might have been her attempt to close the conversation or head off a more pointed comment by Jesus about what the truth really consisted of since Jesus already knew secrets of her life.

21. Optional: Why do you think Jesus openly revealed His messianic identity to her (v. 26)?

He rarely revealed Himself to anyone since He knew that some Jews wanted to make Him their king. Then they would expect Him to overthrow the Romans who were politically and militarily dominating Israel (John 6:15; John 12:12-19). Now, in Samaria, it was even more surprising that He revealed His identity as The One sent by God, since He had said, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel”, i.e. to first proclaim salvation to the Jews (Matt. 10:24). Initially, when Jesus did talk with the twelve disciples about His identity, suffering, death and resurrection, it was also outside Israel proper in the region of Caesarea Philippi (Mark 8:27-30).

APPLYING THE TEXT

***How did Jesus' dialogue with the woman continually move her closer to the truth about Himself?**

Answers will vary as individuals observe different ways the conversation progressed. Generally, Jesus took her from the **external** life, to her **internal** life, and ultimately to **eternal** life.

He moved from the **physical** to the **emotional** to the **spiritual** realm.

This could also be expressed as from **work** to **will** to **worship**; from **well water**, to **living water** to the **Source**.

You can trace how this woman's ideas about Jesus changed by looking at vv. 9, 11, 19, 25-26, and 29. Ephrem the Syrian noted that she saw him first as a thirsty **man**; then a **Jew**; then a **rabbi** when she called him "Sir"; next a **prophet** when he revealed her past; and finally as **the Christ**, (cited in Findlay, p. 61, cited by Leon Morris, p. 254).

For your benefit, although this is much too detailed to try to cover in a lively group conversation, you can see the following pattern of Jesus picking up on key words and exposing the spiritual implication of them:

Jesus: v8 drink
v10 drink, living water
vv13-14 drinks, water, thirst
v16 husband
vv17-18 no/not husband (s)
vv21-24 the Father, place of worship
Spirit, truth, coming
v26 I ...am he.

Woman: v9 drink
v11-12 living water, drank
vv15 water, thirsty
v17 no husband
vv19-20 our fathers, place of worship,
v25 Messiah, coming

***What is one important lesson you learned about sharing Christ with the unsaved?**

***How will you make this a part of your life this week?**

Pray together that the Lord will assist you in recognizing seekers and initiating conversations with them.

WRAPPING IT UP

Jesus met a woman in the heat of the day at a well. He engaged her in conversation not to satisfy His physical thirst but to meet her spiritual thirst for love. Capitalizing on the image of water, He offered her something she could not obtain on her own, living water, and then probed her unsuccessful search for love with men. Avoiding an ancient debate, He announced that soon true worship would no longer take place in any one location but in relationship to Himself, the True Way to God, through the Holy Spirit. Her response was to run and tell the villagers (whom she had probably avoided in the past) that she had met someone who might be the Messiah, God's Anointed Servant. Her encounter with Jesus evidenced a changed life, which is the true mark of the Holy Spirit's living in us. This week, look for common needs you and those around you share, and pray for opportunities to bridge the gap from the natural to the supernatural in their lives.

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