THE WORD IS LIVING AND ACTIVE
BIBLE STUDY THAT LEADS TO CONVERSATIONAL MESSAGE DELIVERY

Key verse: Hebrews 4:12

“For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.”

The conversational style of message delivery is part of a program for Bible study that can feed God’s sheep and raise them as disciples of Jesus Christ. The principle of Bible study that we adhere to is one of submitting to the author’s presentation of the word of God. What the author emphasizes, we want to emphasize. How the author emphasizes it, we want to imitate. Ultimately, what we want to do is unfold the meaning of the text, which is presented through the factual, logical, emotional and spiritual content of the passage. Because each passage and each author is unique in how each of these factors are used, the conversational style of message delivery is the most suited for presentation of a textual Bible study, because it is the most flexible and is also the most direct manner of presenting meaning. Conversational message delivery is the style of delivery most conducive to presenting the entire spectrum of meaning of the passage. Therefore, although conversational delivery may not be as forceful as other styles, it helps the speaker and congregation confront the whole meaning of the passage, and respond to it from the heart. As we have defined previously, a Bible messenger is one who moves sinners to repentance, opening the door to the rejuvenating work of the Holy Spirit. Let’s learn how we can use the conversational style to lead sinners to repentance.

I. What is conversational style?

The conversational style of message delivery is an extension of ordinary conversation. A good conversation typically covers a large range of emotions. In a good conversation, there will be drama, comedy, passionate expression, etc. It is not formal or structured, but is very flexible according to the content and seriousness of the topic. Also, it is not one-sided at all, but involves a great deal of interaction, challenges and responses. A conversational message contains these basic features of a conversation as the messenger presents the meaning of the Bible passage and challenges the listeners to apply that meaning in their personal lives. When the message is presented to the listeners in a conversational style, they can experience that they are engaged in a conversation with the messenger, and in fact, with the word of God itself. In this way, they can respond to God’s word personally, even though the message is being given to many people at once.

II. How does conversational style differ from other message styles?

Conversational style of message delivery is often presented as the alternative to preaching “one-sidedly.” Preaching a message is a biblical concept. Paul and Barnabas are described as “preaching the good news” on their missionary journeys. It is a presentation of the promise of God’s salvation, and the fulfillment of that promise through Christ Jesus.
Preaching is presenting God’s truth as it is, declaring God’s judgment and God’s mercy to those who have been living in the dark. It is literally shining God’s light into the darkness. In this sense, preaching is unavoidable and absolutely necessary.

But preaching has a limitation in leading others to grow in their relationship with Christ Jesus. In particular, for those who have heard the message before, preaching to them can appear to be talking at them. They may have real questions or concerns regarding the Bible passage, and how it applies to them. They need to have the gospel message presented in such a way that those concerns and questions are addressed. But one who sets out to preach the truth has as his goal to say what he needs to say, not address individual concerns or acknowledge individual questions. The conversational style of message delivery personalizes the message that had been preached. It is not presented by a disembodied voice, as John preached the coming of Christ in the desert. Instead, the person of the messenger as one who has heard and accepted the message of the Bible passage plays a central role in helping those who listen to also receive God’s message through his word personally. It is the very personal message of Isaiah, who stood with his children as signs and symbols for his generation. It is the very personal message of Ezekiel, who had to bear his wife’s death silently, as would the exiles the fall of Jerusalem. The conversational message is not the voice of God to the people. The conversational message is the voice of God’s servant who has humbled himself and accepted the word of God as the word of God.

III. How can conversational style best serve textual Bible study?

The greatest concern for the messenger who delivers a Bible message conversationally is the problem of how not to compromise the absolute truth of God’s word. Because conversation is essentially give-and-take, and requires spontaneity and compassion, there is the possibility that God’s word might be understood as something to be debated or even questioned. There is no easy way to deal with this problem, just as there is no easy way to deal with the problem of how to make what is preached personally meaningful to the listener. In fact, they are probably just two sides of the same coin. The effective Bible messenger provides a way for the listeners to hear the divine word in such a way that it can become part of his or her reality. Just as the incarnation of Jesus cost him great suffering, pain and finally death, so a great struggle is required on the part of the messenger to make the way for the divine word of God to be welcomed into the hearts of sinners. The messenger can maintain a right attitude toward the word of God and a right attitude toward the listeners only through a personal struggle to accept God’s word as it is, and respond to its meaning very personally. Thus, the conversational message is the fruit of deep and personal textual Bible study. Indeed, it demands it.

IV. How to prepare a conversational message

Just as a skater seeks to perform her routine giving the appearance that she is always under control and never strained, so the messenger seeks to present God’s word in a natural and graceful manner. That is impossible without bone crushing labor on the part of the skater or the messenger.
Of course, each week, our goal is to write a message and deliver it. So, the natural tendency is to get to the finished product as soon as possible, and then work on delivery. But our real struggle must take place before we even write one sentence of our message. The foundation of textual Bible study and conversational message style is established through memorization of the Bible passage. It is the experience of every messenger who was trained by Dr. Samuel Lee that Bible passage memorization and expressive recitation were the backbone of his Bible study. This discipline defines for the messenger how to approach the Bible passage, how to think about it, and how to unify it into a single message.

First of all, memorization of the Bible passage must be word for word accurate. It can be frustrating to stumble over the precise wording of the Bible passage. We are smart, and we might feel that our way of saying what is written makes more sense, or is more natural. This is a temptation, but we must not give in to it. We have to practice faith in the word of God as it is. We have to humble ourselves before the word of God, and listen very carefully what it is saying to us and to God’s people. That is impossible, unless we first carefully observe and acknowledge precisely what it says. Bible passage memorization must be 100% correct.

Bible passage memorization, however, is not to be rote memorization, like one would memorize a list of names, or a set of rules or facts for some test. Even while memorizing for the sake of word for word accuracy, we must strive for accuracy in meaning. That is, our recitation of the Bible passage must express the meaning of the Bible passage. We should not think that the words alone express the meaning. Meaning is expressed in so many ways as we speak. If we do not match the meaning expressed through our speech with the meaning of the words we are saying, there is a conflict which confuses our message. This is not a matter of being an actor or performer. This is a vital part of being a messenger of God’s word, and of helping God’s people to be able to listen to God’s word as it actually is. Indeed, our ability to master the meaning of the passage in this way is an absolutely necessary example for our sheep to understand how to listen to and respond to God’s word. Accuracy in meaning through proper expression makes the word of God come alive for you as a messenger, and for God’s people who listen.

In this short presentation, I cannot address every aspect of how meaning can be expressed through speech. I don’t know every aspect of how meaning can be expressed through speech! But I would like to focus on what I’ve learned about the importance of phrasing, within sentences and within paragraphs. Ultimately, the ideas of phrasing can be applied to understand how the entire passage hangs together, and how the passage fits into the chemistry of the Bible. Proper phrasing is also essential to developing and maintaining a conversational style of message delivery.

The key concept in using proper phrasing is that ideas are best expressed through opposition and contrast. We cannot know what light really is without experiencing the darkness. We cannot know what true fellowship is without experiencing true loneliness. Contrast really highlights meaning, and the Bible is full of contrasts. We know the contrasts between Cain and Abel, Abraham and Lot, Joseph and his brothers, Saul and
David, to name a few. What the one failed to do brought out more clearly what the other succeeded in doing. And the judgment itself is the time when all contrasts will become absolutely clear, with no more room for shades of gray. Bible teaching is also full of contrasts which color the preaching of the prophets and of Jesus. In our presentation of the Bible passage, we must let the contrasts that are in the Bible passage color our speech.

For example, Isaiah lived in a time of great fear and anxiety in Judea, from the time of Uzziah’s death to the Assyrian invasion. But Isaiah proclaimed the message of hope and confidence for those who seek God. When Isaiah spoke about the pending Assyrian invasion, he never failed to balance the threat and terror that they presented with God’s sovereign rule of history. This tension and contrast between the reality of the Assyrian invasion and the flow of divine history makes the book of Isaiah a thrilling Bible study. But how to convey this tension through our message?

Consider Isaiah 10:15. “Does the ax raise itself above him who swings it?” The ax is a frightening weapon. But it has no volition of its own. Isaiah presents this idea so dramatically. There is real power and encouragement to repentance and faith behind it. So when we recite it, we must not miss Isaiah’s supreme confidence in God who puts the ax of the Assyrians into his hands. The contrast is between what we fear, and who holds the real authority. To highlight this contrast, we can bring our voice down at “ax”. This serves to de-emphasize and objectify the ax, making it less fearsome. Then raise the voice at “raise”. This serves to emphasize the inability of the ax to make its own plans by giving strength to what is being questioned. The ax can hurt, yes, but can it raise itself to hurt us? No. If our voice then dips on the verb “swings”, then we can draw attention away from the ax, and on to the one who wields it. This sentence, as it is written, conveys its message so powerfully only when we exploit the contrasts between the perceived subject, the ax, and the actual subject, the one who swings it. With this one sentence, well-phrased, we can "swing" peoples' attention from the fearsome situation right in front of them, to the one who in fact controls the events. It can be an eye-opening and liberating moment for the one who hears and believes. When we emphasize the contrast, we make a powerful statement and challenge to ourselves and everyone else who fears something or someone in the world more than God. Surely, Isaiah is a master at using such vivid expressions, but he is not the only one. As Hebrews 4:12 says, God's word is a double-edged sword. It has power to cut because of what it says, and how it says it.

This idea of phrasing and contrast can be extended to paragraphs and even the entire passage. Indeed, as I study books multiple times, I become more aware of the phrasing that ties together the passages of the book, and even how the book is phrased within the whole Bible. Dr. Samuel Lee called this idea of phrasing, "orchestration," or sometimes "Bible chemistry."

In the course of digesting the word of God from the passage, it quite frequently happens that certain parts of the passage become stumbling blocks. Sometimes, it is difficult to remember the appropriate words. More often, it is not clear how one sentence follows from the previous one and flows into the next. So, I get stuck again and again as I recite. A lot of that struggle has to do with the lack of proper phrasing. And lack of phrasing means I
haven’t accepted or mastered the meaning of the passage as a whole. I have learned to accept these stumbling blocks as the urging of the Holy Spirit to come to God in prayer and meditation, until God gives me new insight, reveals my sin, or shows me my unbelief. We should not be machine-like in our Bible study. We ourselves have to listen to the word of God as we prepare. Unless we soften our own hearts, and let God's word be written there in deep contrition, then it is not real to us, and only with great difficulty can it be real to our sheep who listen. We cannot do it ourselves. God can do it, when we come to him in repentance and faith.

When we study the Bible with a heart to hear God’s message to us in order to be used to give God’s message to God’s flock, God can bless our messages and Bible study so much. By memorizing the Bible passage with this goal in mind, we can prepare questions for study and the manuscript itself that lead God’s flock on the same “journey” that we made through the passage. The questions and manuscript can serve to highlight and illuminate the key points of the passage, guide your listeners through the difficult parts, and ultimately lead God’s sheep to an understanding of the passage, and how to apply it to themselves as sheep and to others as shepherds.

May God bless your spiritual struggling to listen and respond to the word of God, and may he use it to raise up a faithful remnant among American college students. May God bless America to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation, even through your intensive and meaningful Bible study.

V. Examples of effective and provocative messages from the Bible that seem to have been delivered in a conversational style.


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