

***Conversational Evangelism:  
How to Listen and Speak so You Can Be Heard***

Norman Geisler and David Geisler,  
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Norman Geisler, a well-known author of apologetics among conservative Christians, and his son David Geisler team up to write this book. The basic premise they begin with is that traditional forms of propositional evangelism, such as explaining to someone briefly the reasons they should accept Jesus Christ as personal Lord and Savior or handing out gospel tracts, have begun to show significantly less return in numbers of conversions over recent years. Concluding that this change has occurred because postmodern cultural values have shifted away from those more amenable to simple presentations of the gospel, the Geislars argue that Christians must develop a new practice of evangelism in order to win people to Christ in the postmodern age.

The new practice that the Geislars propose is something they call alternately “pre-evangelism” or “conversational evangelism.” It is “pre” because they argue that this practice is necessary prior to engaging in “direct evangelism,” which they identify with the traditional practices that otherwise are not as effective today. Drawing from the parable of the sower, they suggest that pre-evangelism tills the ground, preparing the soil to receive the good seed of the gospel through direct evangelism. It is “conversational” because the way a Christian is to prepare the soil is through engaging in four types of conversations that will help their non-Christian interlocutors come to recognize their need for accepting Jesus Christ. These conversations are “hearing conversations, illuminating conversations, uncovering conversations, and building

conversations” (32). The Geislars draw analogies between the different conversations and four professions. These are the musician, artist, archaeologist, and builder, respectively.

The bulk of the book (chapters 3, 4, 5, and 6) is dedicated to explicating each of these four conversations. The hearing conversation is described as a conversation in which Christians “listen for clues to what our non-Christian friends really believe deep in their hearts” (49). The assumption the Geislars make is that these beliefs will ultimately prove to be logically fallible, containing what the Geislars call “sour notes” (49) of inconsistency that make the beliefs untenable.

Through illuminating conversations Christians pick up these sour notes and proceed to help the non-Christians to recognize the inconsistencies in their own belief structures. This is done through asking careful, probing questions that allow the non-Christians to recognize these inconsistencies on their own. According to the Geislars, these questions must follow “the Three Ds” by focusing on surfacing *doubts* on the sufficiency on the non-Christians’ beliefs, minimizing the *defensiveness* of the non-Christians, and creating a *desire* of the non-Christians to hear more (81).

Assuming that the Christians have successfully deconstructed the pre-existing beliefs held by the non-Christians, the Christians then engage in uncovering conversations in order to identify and remove any barriers the non-Christians may have to accepting a very specific set of propositions about Jesus Christ. The Geislars explain that these barriers may be intellectual, spiritual, emotional, or volitional. Each kind must be dealt with sensitively, but always in a way that keeps the non-Christians from being able to retreat from facing these barriers.

Finally, having overcome the non-Christians’ pre-existing beliefs and having brought to light and dealt with their barriers to accepting Christ, the Christians are then able to participate in

a building conversation. In this conversation, the Christians carefully foster trust with the non-Christians so that the Christians might enter into direct evangelism. This trust is built through establishing common ground between the Christians' and non-Christians' beliefs and through building apologetic points of contact that will allow the Christians to help the non-Christians construct a Christian worldview based on basic propositional truths about Jesus Christ.

The last three chapters in the book are given over to describing specific difficulties that Christians may encounter in deploying their pre-evangelism. They offer specific questions that Christians can ask different non-Christian audiences (e.g., Mormons, Buddhists, Muslims, postmoderns) with the goal of surfacing logical fallacies in their respective belief systems. They also offer specific answers to questions about Christianity often posed by those who are resistant or hostile to the Christian faith. These answers are based on what the Geislers call the "boomerang principle" in which Christians seek to shift the onus of defending one's belief off of himself or herself and onto the questioner. No less than five appendices follow with similar sorts of specific instruction, including suggestions on how to memorize the practice of conversational evangelism so that the reader can get it right in practice.

A troubling aspect of this book is that it does not always seem to be self-aware. The Geislers consistently argue that conversational evangelism needs to be meek, gentle, wise, and Spirit-led. However, large tracks of the book are not geared toward teaching the appropriate pastoral skills to be in such conversations. Instead, they are given over to specific quotes that Christians can listen for so that they can pounce on them with stock answers provided by the authors. Although the Geislers do make occasional attempts at warning readers not to use their book this way, the fact that they include vast numbers of bullet-pointed sample "sour notes"

coupled with suggestions on how to counter these comments logically, makes it seem that the Geislers are suggesting their readers do as the authors say, not as the authors do.

Connected to this lack of self-awareness is how the book consistently resists speaking in terms of building genuine relationships with non-Christians. While the Geislers do offer examples from their own lives about non-Christian friends they have, they never suggest such friendships are valuable in their own right. Relationships and conversations are seen as only means to an end of persuading someone to accept a very specific set of truth claims about Jesus Christ. That this is not an overstatement is seen by the fact that the only time the Geislers mention love in relationship to evangelism is when they state “Here is where two great weapons in the Christian arsenal can be helpful: *love* and *prayer*” (98). Love only appears as a way of knocking down a specific barrier to a person accepting Jesus, and it is only typified as a weapon that “can be helpful.” There is no sense of reorienting the Christian life around the love of Christ such that this love flows out of the Christian to all around him or her.

Also striking about this book is how remarkably behind the curve it seems in terms of evangelism theory. The fact that a book published in 2009 is just beginning to grapple with questions of how postmodernity influences culture and what the implications are for evangelism suggests that the Geislers have remained largely unaware of the larger corpus of evangelism literature that is being published. Indeed, the bibliography they include detailing books on apologetics and evangelism supports this by the fact that a substantial number of the texts cited have been authored by the elder Geisler directly or by one of his students. This gives the impression that the Geislers work in a very tight network of like-minded apologists and evangelists with little awareness of scholarly work by those outside of that network.

This lack of integration with the larger body of work on evangelism is a shame, as what the Geislers cover in their book could provide an excellent dialogue partner with this work. Much of this work emphasizes the importance of building relationships as critical to evangelism, but is very light in the area of apologetics. The Geislers, who struggle with the idea of developing relationships apart from having a clear spiritual agenda for those relationships, but who are very strong in understanding the need to speak to the imprecision and inconsistencies in the beliefs of those who are not Christians, could find aid for their own areas of weakness while shoring up the work of others. Specifically, it would be interesting to put the Geislers' book in conversation with such texts as Brad Kallenberg's *Live to Tell*, Brian McLaren's *More Ready than You Realize*, and Dan Kimball's *They Like Jesus but Not the Church*. Each of these texts holds up building relationships as the central act of evangelism, but move in very different directions as to how or if apologetics should be deployed in those relationships.

My hunch is that, in conversation with other authors, the Geislers could learn that to love is the most evangelistic activity of all, and that apologetics, while certainly not to be jettisoned, do not take nearly so central a place in evangelism in today's culture. Moreover, I suspect that they would come to realize that their effort at trying to reseat the Enlightenment mindset in culture over and against the postmodern mindset is neither possible nor necessarily advantageous to the Christian evangelistic effort. Indeed, it may be the very fact that Christians cannot claim to be at the core of at least the culture of the United States that offers Christians in the United States the opportunity to be more zealously creative and loving as means of sharing Christ with those around them.

As such, this book is not one that I would recommend be used unless it is read along with other books on evangelism that deal heavily with the importance of forging loving relationships.

Apart from this broader context, I fear that the book would do more to isolate and alienate Christians in their practice of evangelism than it would to help them share their faith effectively.