

TABLE TALK

Authentic Discussions



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AUTHENTIC DISCUSSIONS

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Bring gospel conversations to breweries, coffee shops, and more. Learn how to host an effective Table Talk that engages people where they are.

Table Talk is a unique, multi-venue outreach strategy that intentionally brings together all types of people to the table to have authentic conversations about life, spirituality, and God—always connecting to the gospel.

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INTRODUCTION

WHAT IS TABLE TALK?

What's the last outreach you've been a part of where non-believers were excited to ask their fellow non-believing friends to join an event where the gospel is presented? Benny is a prime example.

Every month I encourage people to send out invitations to Table Talk. My co-host, Matt, invited Benny (an atheist), who had no desire to go to church or Bible study. After his first experience of the discussion, he expressed his excitement and the need to have these deeper discussions.

So, what do you do if you enjoy something? You invite others to experience the joy you're experiencing! Benny then brought his co-worker and his wife, who are also atheists, to participate in the discussion. What's amazing is that non-Christians can be motivated to participate in helping others hear the gospel! There are many other stories like this where non-Christians are inviting non-Christians to a discussion where the gospel is clearly and organically presented.

There's no getting around it—the idea of evangelism is intimidating to the everyday Christian.

Two of the most common reasons we avoid sharing the gospel are fear of rejection and lack of confidence. We can shrink back in fear: we don't want to offend anyone, we don't want to feel uncomfortable. We get stuck in surface-level conversations because we don't know how to naturally move into deeper topics.

The early church grew rapidly because people found ways to integrate the gospel into their everyday environments—where they lived, worked, learned, and worshiped.

They demonstrated their love for Jesus by sharing the gospel in the power of the Holy Spirit. Couldn't the modern church grow in the same way? Is there really a way to consistently live missionally for Jesus today in a way that's natural and well received? The answer is yes!

Table Talk is a way for every type of Christian to reach every type of non-Christian.

How is this possible?

Table Talk prioritizes a listening posture that gives the non-Christian opportunities to speak in an environment they're comfortable in without feeling judged. People want to be heard and understood rather than to be told what to believe.

So, what if an aspect of living missionally meant that Christians simply invite their non-Christian friends to have a discussion on relatable life topics in a way that values their opinion? In other words, Table Talk is an open invitation for all people to bring their full self (opinions and spiritual views) to the table.

Now if all opinions are welcome to the table as a foundational principle, then it's appropriate and organic for Jesus to be brought into the discussion. For the Christian, the gospel is the center of all life and solves every existential tension in human experiences. For this reason, every Table Talk conversation leads to a gospel connection point demonstrating how Jesus is relevant to every person and the things we care about today.

Table Talk satisfies a crucial need in Christian communities around the world by easily activating Christians who aren't living missionally on a consistent basis. Since this event is held each month, there's always an invitation to give to your friends, family, acquaintances, and even strangers. People will be intrigued by discussions that center around topics we all question, like human nature, justice, faith, hypocrisy, purpose, fear, anxiety, love, anger, and more. Plus, whoever shows up each month receives a complimentary menu item — a bonus incentive to join the conversation.

So, in short, Table Talk is a monthly gathering where a Christian host goes to a space where non-Christians feel comfortable and at home to have an open, inviting conversation on a number of relevant topics that all people wrestle with. As we'll see in a later section, a brewery or pub often makes an ideal environment. The host can make the gathering all the more welcoming by committing to purchase the first food or beverage item for all who attend.



THE HEART OF TABLE TALK

THE BURDENED HEART There is no good reason to spend time doing evangelism if you don't see a need. Unfortunately, need is almost exclusively what we see when we look at the spiritual reality of America. The USA ranks 5th in the world in unchurched population, with more than 168 million people identifying as post-Christian.¹ Practically speaking, this means that at least 50% of the people that you see each day (probably more) don't have a personal relationship with Jesus.

Despite these saddening numbers, we Christians are bringing our own discouraging numbers to the table. In a 2018 article, Barna Group Research revealed that a "growing number of Christians don't see sharing the good news as their personal responsibility."² What has happened to lull us into a sense of complacency in our faith? I've found that Christians seem to be experts on vaccines, politics, race, and everything except Jesus.

Jesus brings a wake up call when we read his words in Matthew: "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore, pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest" (Matthew 9:37). It has always been the mission of God to send laborers out into the world—we must be the ones to say "here I am, Lord. Send me!" (Isaiah 6:8 NIV).

THE MISSIONAL HEART In Matthew 28:19, Jesus gives this command to his followers: "Go therefore and make disciples." This is the response to a burdened heart—a missional heart.

But how do we do this in American culture? What simple, biblical principle did Jesus model that we can practice cross-culturally? Meet people where they live, work, learn, and play. There are countless times that Jesus went out of his way to meet someone where they were, but we're been given detailed accounts of several:

- The Pharisee (Luke 7:36)
- Tax collectors and "sinners" (Luke 5:29-31)
- Zacchaeus (Luke 19:5)
- The woman at the well (John 4)

¹ Statistics on Churchgoers in America and more - Church Movements Website: <https://www.churchmovements.com/>

² Sharing Faith Is Increasingly Optional to Christians - Barna Group: <https://www.barna.com/research/sharing-faith-increasingly-optional-christians/>

These references highlight one of Jesus' missional strategies, and it's simple: go where the people are. In each of these cases, Jesus went to various geographical locations to reach people. The Pharisees, tax collectors, prostitutes, morally broken, and racial outsiders were intentionally and personally met outside the synagogue. Two of my favorite conversations between Jesus and Pharisees happen in John 3 and Luke 7. In both instances, Jesus talked with these religious leaders away from the judgment and criticism of their peers in the synagogue. Nicodemus (John 3) went to find Jesus at night to have a conversation with him, and a Pharisee (Luke 7) invited Jesus to his home to share a discussion over a meal. These became safe spaces for people to explore the teachings of Jesus.

When Jesus engaged in spiritual discussions with stereotypical outsiders, he approached them because they weren't welcome in religious spaces. Jesus said, "Zacchaeus...I must stay at your house today" (Luke 19:5). Notice that he didn't say, "Zacchaeus, come to the synagogue, or come to my sermon so I can teach you." Zacchaeus likely would have been thrown out as a traitor if he came to a synagogue. Jesus was the best preacher that ever lived, yet he met Zacchaeus' spiritual needs through a more personal conversation. The woman at the well is another example of Jesus meeting someone who was ethnically outcast by Jewish people. Even Jesus' disciples were shocked when they saw him talking to her. Yet Jesus went out of his way and broke cultural norms to have a spiritual discussion that changed her life forever. Jesus' strategy was to go where the people were!

But even before Jesus's ministry on earth started, he was in the habit of coming to people where they were. He came to be a human to dwell with us. The Incarnation is the ultimate reality of God's timeless strategy of meeting people where they're at. He physically came to our geographic location. He lowered himself from sitting in heaven to walking around on the dirt of the earth and talking with people who hated him. He showed us the ultimate picture of humility while also modeling evangelism.

The problem is that sin gets in the way of an actual relationship with God. So, not only did Jesus come as a human to earth, he came with a solution to the problem. We couldn't fix our own messiness, and instead of saying "better luck next time," Jesus came to where we were, entered into our mess, and gave us grace. On earth he perfectly obeyed all of God's standards (he represents the perfect version of ourselves that we can't attain) and willingly took our punishment for all the wrongs we've committed. Like a sponge, he absorbed our sin and was cut off relationally from the Father for our sake! What kind of God suffers physically (torn to shreds), emotionally (mocked on his deathbed), and is then rejected from the Father when he was needed most? Jesus.

But then he arose from the grave three days later—coming to us once again in his power. How many times does Jesus have to approach us before we figure out that he's really good? This is why we approach others, because we have been relentlessly pursued.

The entire Christian faith hinges on God's love that could only be fully expressed if he came to us—there's no other way.



He came to our world to live the perfect life we could not live and died the death that all of us deserve. When he conquered death, he gave life to all who simply trust in faith that he paid our debts of wrongs. Simultaneously God forgives our past, present, and future sins. We become his children where we are positionally loved and accepted forever. God treats us like we are perfect as Jesus transfers his clean record to us through faith.

Our motivation for obeying his commands is now love and affection rather than cold-hearted obligation. Nobody can ever repay his debt by doing good things, but we can obey just because we love what he's done for us. For example, if I paid your past, present, and future financial debts forever by giving you billions of dollars, you would love that! You may even say, "Hey Nate, I love you and appreciate your generosity!" Now, if I asked you to mow my lawn this summer because I'm going on vacation, I'm sure you'd say something like, "it's the least I could do!" It would be strange upon my return from my summer vacation if you approached me with your chest puffed out, having a massive smile on your face as you say, "I guess we're even now that I paid you back." To be greeted this way would be taken offensively because you can't possibly pay me back by mowing my lawn! It's impossible. If I came home and you said, "I'm just happy to reflect even

in a small way the kindness you've shown me by paying off my debts," how could I be upset with that? We seek to obey Jesus because he's infinitely beautiful. Beauty over duty is our motivation to obey him.

On a Table Talk night (November 19th, 2024) a woman I had never met showed up from an advertisement on social media. During the conversation, she mentioned how she's medicated heavily for struggling with anxiety; she mentioned specifically that she cannot drive on highways. I then said, "If you don't mind me asking, was it hard for you to come to Table Talk, where you're having conversations with a bunch of strangers?" She replied, "No, my anxiety wasn't that bad because I came with my friend. Also, I've been to this brewing company many times before. I'm familiar with this place. If Table Talk happened in a place that I've never been before, I wouldn't have come." This is a real person who is joining the Table Talk community because we came to her world. This excited me to bring Jesus and build his community (the church) where people are! Let's maximize this potential to reach people.

THE RELATIONAL HEART As Jesus showed us, we want to engage with non-believers in an authentic way. We want to have actual conversations and friendships. They aren't our "projects."

When we do find people where they're at, we need to be listening to them. Otherwise, what's the point of approaching them? When we

listen to people, we get a picture of their life—like a story. All good stories have one thing in common: conflict. As I ask people questions about their story, I look for friction points where they've experienced potential hardships in life and ask how they've dealt with it. This is the area where I want to connect the gospel. I find that the gospel relates to all areas of life and when it meets the deepest need of their pain, Jesus shines brightly as the solution.

The Problem of Community

I've noticed that people in general have a hard time knowing how to talk and open up their hearts to others. This is all too common and gets in the way of us connecting with one another. So wouldn't it be amazing if Christians really learned how to converse with people in a way that gives life and significance to them? The power of words cannot be overlooked in Scripture. After all, God created life in the world by speaking everything into existence (Genesis 1 and John 1). Don't underestimate the power of words and the need to learn how to be a better communicator. Listen, read, learn, and practice conversations to sharpen your interpersonal skills in talking to others. For some it comes naturally; others may need to work harder. That's okay! Always remember, your words matter and they can save lives. The aim of Table Talk is to speak life to everyone through the Holy Spirit who comes to the table.

What about introverts? Does Table Talk provide a space for them to thrive? The answer is yes! In fact, I developed this outreach strategy with introverts in mind. I remember my wife being frustrated one time saying, "What about me? I'm an introvert, and it's really difficult to walk up to strangers and share the gospel. I freeze and it feels awkward! How do I participate in sharing the gospel?" As an extrovert, I must admit that it's even awkward for me to randomly approach strangers with the intent of sharing the gospel. But, as I began thinking about conventional evangelism models, I realized that most are geared toward extroverts. This is a problem because the Great Commission does not make distinctions, saying, "Go therefore extroverts and make disciples of all nations..." Jesus' commission is for all of his disciples to go and make disciples. Introverts and extroverts are both called to live missionally. For this reason, Table Talk is uniquely designed for both extroverts and introverts to work together in the Great Commission.

As an extrovert, I can find myself listening for the purpose of giving a rapid response. Unfortunately, this can result in missing key elements of conversation that lead to embarrassing moments where the person is probably thinking, "Is this guy even listening to me?" My wife, on the other hand, has a listening strength where she captures all the details in her mind so that she can appropriately respond in a way that gives people a sense of personal value. As I've experienced introverts, they bring warmth in conversational settings because they listen intently and pick up non-verbal communication with acute awareness. I've asked many introverts about their experience at a discussion, and it's always positive and they come back.

So, let's work together as God uniquely wired us as individuals! Whether you lean extroverted or introverted, everyone can send a personal invitation to someone to join the conversation of Table Talk.



This makes living missionally easy and practical. All you have to do is invite your friend, and you're now participating in evangelism! Many have accepted Christ through Table Talk while subsequently discovering a thriving spiritual community in the church as a practical next step.

Table Talk as a Means to Community

Table Talk brings hope to people by building a community of trust outside the walls of a church where people discover healing in the power of the gospel. Many aren't ready to step foot in a church or Bible Study because of their perception of Christians. As you build this community, you discover people's spiritual and physical needs and care for them. Table Talk humanizes spiritual conversations in a way that people feel valued, heard, and loved as their personal stories are shared without judgment. Every person is made in the image of God and needs to be treated with respect; first and foremost, they need to be reconnected relationally with their Creator.

My hope is that Table Talk would be a space for all types of people to share their personal stories, opinions, and feelings, and where people inevitably get vulnerable with each other. When this happens, a community naturally forges. Gradually, the Table Talk host, co-host, and fellow Christians can begin shepherding people into discipleship environments in a local church or small group.

One time I invited a non-Christian, Bryan, to a Table Talk discussion. After months of him attending, I asked him one night, "So what do you think about Jesus after all of these conversations?" This opened up an opportunity to share the gospel with him. As we talked, he started weeping uncontrollably. The Holy Spirit was tugging at his heart. He had questions about the Holy Spirit and my co-host Matt began describing the nature of God to him. At one point Bryan was asked, "What, if anything, would prevent you from trusting Jesus right now?" His response was "Nothing." That night he professed faith in Jesus Christ. Bryan then started his journey of connecting with a local church to find a deeper community. He was baptized shortly thereafter.

THE HOPEFUL HEART Jake is another incredible story. He soaks up the conversation and is intrigued by how meaningful Table Talk is for a wide range of people. He's naturally built relationships with people that have different faiths, backgrounds, and political affiliations. When he's able to attend, he finds tremendous value in the unique relationships that he comes across. He was agnostic when he first started attending, but after multiple Table Talks and personal discussions, he's come to realize that Christianity isn't just blind faith; it is far more reasonable than he imagined. Over time, he found that Table Talk created a community where people look out for one another. Once, my co-host reached out to Jake for legal help (Jake is an immigration lawyer) for someone whose visa was set to expire before his US-based cancer treatment finished. Jake got involved and was able to help this individual stay in the United States to finish out his treatment! Jake began to ponder his faith. From his background, he didn't realize that Christianity was helpful or reasonable. Months later, he came to a point of professing faith in Jesus!

Table Talk truly builds community to the point where spiritual and physical needs are met. The hopeful heart knows and sees that everyone is on a spiritual journey. God is already at work, and he has already used Table Talk to draw people to himself and his church; it's incredible to watch! Trust me, you can expect that the Holy Spirit will move through your conversations and reach all types of people.

My hope is for future Christians to be known in the world as great listeners and people to talk with. Wouldn't it be amazing if people walked away from Christians saying, "wow, that conversation was awesome and she was able to speak to my heart. I feel valued and cared for whenever she's around."

The future seems to be technologically focused, and people may struggle to have in-depth conversations. Although they crave them, they may not know how to have them. As an Army chaplain in the National Guard, I counsel a lot of young soldiers who go through difficult times. Many come with suicidal thoughts, depression, and anxiety. After talking with them and processing life with a heart of listening while asking good questions, they've said, "Wow, I just needed to talk. I've been keeping this stuff inside and I just didn't know how to talk about it to anyone. Thanks for talking and helping me see life from a different perspective."

Let's begin thinking creatively about where people are and go there, offering Jesus and community! We know how to connect with one another in the power of the Spirit, and the world needs that right now.



THE ENVIRONMENT OF TABLE TALK



CREATING A HEALTHY COMMUNITY

As we think about how to structure a Table Talk meeting in a way that meets the communal needs of the participants, let's think through starting the meeting with **J.U.M.P** as a framework:

JOYFUL: Set the tone by welcoming all to the table & lead introductions with energy.

UNDERSTAND: Cast vision so participants know why Table Talk exists.

MAXIMIZE: Get the most out of the conversation—read the Guidelines to protect everyone's vulnerabilities.

PREPARE: Each discussion should start with a broad introduction to steer the conversation, beginning with an easy, "shallow end of the pool" question that allows everyone to participate freely.

DISCUSSION STARTER EXAMPLE After joyfully welcoming all to the table, say something like the following:

"I'm excited and glad you're here at Table Talk. This is a safe place where we can have authentic discussions about anything in life without being judged.

It's hard to have real conversations in our society because everything seems polarizing, but my goal is to welcome all opinions here. Please, bring your full self to the table; there will be no judgment. Before we begin the conversation, I want to go over some ground rules to make sure everyone feels comfortable and safe to share their opinions. (READ GUIDELINES HERE). Tonight, we're talking about "conflict" because it's a part of everyday life. So, my first question is "Why does every great story involve a significant amount of conflict?"

The goal is to facilitate conversation that creates a comfortable environment for everyone. We do this in two ways: demeanor and posture. Our demeanor should be expressive of an energetic, fun, and enthusiastic attitude. Doing this with confidence will create a space where participants also feel confident in sharing their views. Our posture is one of listening and learning, rather than teaching and preaching. Keep in mind the acronym **S.W.I.M.** when trying to have this posture:

SAFE: Read and enforce the Guidelines and mirror participants emotions. For example, if someone has been dominating the conversation you might say, "Hey Roger, I really appreciate your thoughts on this question, does anyone else have any thoughts?"

WISE: Avoid the temptation to correct or teach participants as you watch the time limit. When there is not enough time to answer a complex question, for example, you might say, "Bill, you have

THE SCIENCE OF TABLE TALK

a great question about why a loving God would allow people to suffer. To give my thoughts thoroughly we should discuss this after tonight's discussion or another time. Is that alright with you? To be clear, I'm not avoiding the question, I simply want to give a comprehensive answer that requires more time."

INVITE: Deepen the conversation. Request elaboration for simple answers to an open question. Give an opportunity to those who haven't spoken yet to maximize inclusion. You might use a question like, "Thanks for sharing Liz! Can you tell us more about that experience and how it made you feel?"

MOVE: Thoroughly address each scripted question and invite unscripted questions while allowing each person to contribute to the conversation. When you get the sense that people have thoroughly discussed a question, look for natural ways to transition to the next scripted question. A simple example of transitioning well could be, "Alright, well it seems we've talked a lot about reconciliation as the goal when conflict arises, which leads me to my next question: 'What is the cost of forgiving someone?'"

CRAFTING YOUR QUESTIONS

Table Talk is attractive because it brings depth and relevance through the art of asking good questions. Have you ever been in a conversation with only a few questions, or ones that don't resonate with you? These are awkward moments that leave you internally screaming to get out of the conversation. Good discussions usually entail a lot of questions because it means that you're listening, processing, and ultimately curious about them. I've heard the expression "there's no such thing as a bad question," but there can be robotic questions that lack depth, or ones that indicate that you're not listening. Thoughtfulness is then the distinguishing factor behind conversations that are enjoyable and ones that are not. If you bring thoughtful questions to a conversation, you can help generate life-changing moments.

Once, I was meeting with a newly appointed outreach pastor. Before I trained him in Table Talk, I wanted to learn more about him and his new position. I simply asked one question that seemed to stick with him every day. I asked, "How much time should an outreach pastor spend outside the church walls?" I asked this question because a lot of churches seem to tack new job descriptions on existing roles without having clear expectations of what they mean. As an outreach pastor, the goal is to make relevant gospel connections and build relationships with unchurched people. It shouldn't surprise outreach pastors that non-Christians aren't hanging around in the church foyer throughout the week!

When I asked him that question, I knew it was thoughtful (prepared in advance), but didn't realize how it could impact his thinking. How did I come up with this question? I had to put myself in his shoes. He was a youth pastor, and the leadership team asked him to be the outreach leader in addition to his current responsibilities. I began thinking of what it would be like to retain the title of youth pastor along with being the leader in outreach. I thought to myself "since non-Christians live outside the church walls, I wonder how much time the elders think he should spend his time out there?" Two months later I had a training call with him and he randomly referred to my question by saying, "That question you asked is always lingering in my mind. I see that I spend way too much time behind a desk at church. I can't get rid of this question." Thoughtful questions are very powerful and help people process life. Behind every good conversation lives thoughtful questions, and it's no surprise that Jesus mastered this.

