

Persuading the Other

How to persuade people to follow Jesus in an increasingly nonreligious culture is an urgent question American Christians must answer.

Today's U.S. Church is navigating a landscape with fewer Christians, less trust in organized religion, and unfavorable views of evangelicals.

Fewer Christians. Since 1972, the General Social Survey has asked, "What is your religious preference?" That year, 90% of respondents identified as Christian and 5% as religiously unaffiliated. In 2021, 64% were Christian, while 29% were unaffiliated (or "nones").

Pew Research Center expects that decline to continue. A 2022 report projects the share of Christians in the U.S. will fall to 35–54% by the year 2070, as more Americans join the ranks of the "nones."

Less trust. Over the past five decades, Gallup has measured trust in various institutions. From 1973–2023, the share of Americans expressing a "great deal" or "quite a lot" of trust in organized religion declined from 65% to 32%. Sentiments of little or no trust increased from 11% to 33%.

Today, as many people distrust organized religion as trust it.

Unfavorable views. Pew reports the percentage of Americans viewing evangelicals favorably is basically the same as those viewing it unfavorably (28% and 27%, respectively).

But those numbers get worse when you remove evangelical respondents from the sample. Then, only 18% of non-evangelical Americans view evangelicals favorably, while 32% view them unfavorably.

If the bad news is fewer Christians, less trust, and unfavorable views, the good news is people are *persuadable*. They can change their minds.

Right now, American Christians aren't convincing many of their neighbors to follow Jesus. However, we *can* become more *persuasive*.

Doing so requires making *institutional* and *individual* changes. For churches, the path to persuasiveness begins with rebuilding trust in the community through greater transparency and accountability. This will take time.

But you and I can begin to become more persuasive today. What does that look like? In a word: *Jesus*. If we want to change the spiritual trajectory of our spheres of influence, we must imitate Him.

Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan woman in John 4 offers an especially salient example for our times. A closer look at this passage reveals seven practices of persuasion.

1. Cross Boundaries

A boundary is a dividing line between *us* and *them*. Jesus crossed several boundaries to talk with the Samaritan woman.

He traversed the *geographical* boundary between Judea and Samaria on the way back to Galilee (John 4:3).

Samaria was part of the northern kingdom of Israel until the Assyrian king Shalmaneser conquered and exiled its people in 722 B.C. (2 Kings 17:1–23). Shalmaneser then moved other ethnic groups into the land. Those groups adopted a form of Torah religion that incorporated pagan elements (17:24–41).

That history contributed to both *ethnic* and *religious* boundaries between Jews and Samaritans. As John puts it, “Jews do not associate with Samaritans” (4:9).

Antipathy between the two peoples was longstanding. In 128 B.C., the Jewish leader John Hyrcanus destroyed the Samaritan temple on Mount Gerizim, furthering the animosity. Perhaps this explains why James and John wanted to “call down fire” on a Samaritan village (Luke 9:51–56).

Jesus also crossed the *gendered* boundary between male and female. The Samaritan woman seemed astonished that a Jewish male would talk with her (John 4:9). Even the disciples were “surprised” (verse 27).

Finally, Jesus navigated the *cultural* boundary between what society deemed honorable and shameful.

John specifies Jesus encountered the Samaritan woman at noon (4:6). Women typically drew water at a well early or late in the day when the temperature was cool. And they usually went with other women to socialize as they performed chores.

The fact that the Samaritan woman went to the well alone at noon suggests she had been ostracized, perhaps because of her marital and sexual history (4:17–18). An honorable man would not typically converse with a shameful woman in such circumstances ... but *Jesus* did.

He crossed those boundaries, and so should we.

Several years ago, a friend and I testified before the Missouri legislature in favor of a religious freedom bill. The primary opponents were members of the LGBT community.

If we want to persuade people to follow Jesus, we must cross the boundaries that separate us from them.

During the lunch break, a transgender individual approached us and said, “If you had experienced what I have experienced, you would think differently about this matter.” After we politely acknowledged the remark, the person walked away.

That comment didn’t change my mind about religious liberty or transgenderism. As a minister of the gospel, however, I regret that I didn’t take the opportunity to extend the conversation. I should have said, “Tell me more.”

Why didn’t I? Because doing so was outside my comfort zone.

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To switch metaphors, we must leave where we feel at home — literally or figuratively — and go where *they* feel at home.

Isn’t that what missionaries do?

2. Be Real

The Gospel of John opens with a theological declaration about Jesus: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ... The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us” (1:1,14).

In other words, Jesus is God incarnate, God in the flesh.

This declaration hints at a sixth boundary Jesus crossed to save us: the boundary between divinity and humanity, Creator and creature, heaven and Earth. He united both in himself.

We often emphasize the Word part of Jesus’ person at the expense of the flesh part. We downplay His human nature in favor of His divine nature. Consequently, we sometimes give the impression Jesus was God in a skin suit.

Jesus looked like us, but He wasn’t *really* like us.

John 4 shows Jesus was indeed like us, however. It depicts the everyday reality of His humanity. Jesus was tired, thirsty and hungry (verses 6–8).

Not only that, but He was also willing to acknowledge His need. Appealing to the kindness of a stranger, Jesus asked, “Will you give me a drink?” (verse 7).

Often, when we invite people to follow Jesus, we present ourselves as people who have it all together. We seemingly have no questions, pains or needs. We assume anything less casts the gospel in a bad light.

This is not the way of Jesus. He asked questions: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46). Jesus felt pain: “Being in anguish, he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground” (Luke 22:44). He became tired, hungry, and thirsty (John 4:6–8).

Jesus was a *real person*. He didn't hide His humanity from the people He invited to follow Him.

In my experience, people move closer to me when I share my struggles, such as clinical depression and chronic pain. Such honesty builds solidarity with others, letting them know they're not alone.

By sharing His need with the Samaritan woman, Jesus made an authentic exchange possible.

People won't get real about *their* lives unless we're real about *ours*. If the first step in becoming persuasive Christians is going where others feel at home, the second is inviting people into our homes — including where we feel need.

Are we sharing our needs with others? We won't be persuasive until we get real.

3. Ask Questions

We often think Jesus taught by lecturing to large crowds, like Billy Graham did during his evangelistic crusades. That was my mental model early in ministry. I figured all I needed was a bigger audience.

There's a place for crusade evangelism and large churches. And Jesus did minister to large crowds (Matthew 4:23–25).

But much of Jesus' ministry involved personal dialogue. According to Stan Guthrie's *All That Jesus Asks*, Jesus posed 295 questions in the Gospels. He also listened to others' questions.

We see this dynamic in Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan woman. Jesus asked one question; the woman asked three. Those questions moved the conversation forward, toward increasingly important concerns.

- *Physical*: "Will you give me a drink of water?" (John 4:7).
- *Relational*: "How can you ask me for a drink?" (4:9)
- *Spiritual*: "Where can you get this living water?" (4:11)
- *Theological*: "Are you greater than our father Jacob?" (4:12)

Through these questions, Jesus led the woman to a moment of divine revelation. According to John 4:25–26, "The woman said, 'I know that Messiah' (called Christ) 'is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us.' Then Jesus declared, 'I, the one speaking to you — I am he.'"

This revelation is the main point of the entire story.

Conversation is an important part of evangelism and discipleship. And tailoring the gospel presentation during conversation requires a willingness to ask and answer questions.

It took me a long time to learn this.

As a new associate pastor, I started a small group. I put chairs in a circle, opened the group with prayer, then lectured for 45 minutes. At the end, with little time remaining, I took questions.

A young woman asked whether the format would be the same every session. I said, “Yes.”

The woman never came back. Eventually, neither did anyone else.

More than a decade later, I led a different small group for married couples. This group was conversational. One man, an unbeliever, asked a lot of questions. They typically began, “How can *you* believe ...?”

The other group members and I did our best to answer, but we also posed questions to him. Sometimes, several sessions passed before the man provided an answer.

I remember the day this man answered a question by saying, “We believe” I pointed out his change of pronouns, from *you* to *we*. He shared that after months of conversation, he had given his heart to Jesus and now considered himself a believer.

We all rejoiced.

People want to be *listened to*, not *lectured at*. Asking questions invites their participation in the conversation.

And while lecturing imparts *information*, asking questions kick-starts *understanding*.

When my son was younger, I often helped with his math homework. Showing him how I solved a problem was quick and easy, but he didn’t learn anything. So I started asking how he would solve the problem, given what he had learned in class. This process was longer and harder, but it helped him understand how math worked.

If we want to persuade people to follow Jesus, we must invite them into a give-and-take conversation of questions and answers. This draws out thoughts, clarifies beliefs, and ultimately leads to a decision.

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4. Go Deeper

During my senior year of college, I began experiencing persistent low back pain and neck stiffness. A three-day drive home after graduation exacerbated the problem. When I got out of the car, my mom sent me straight to the doctor.

It turns out these were symptoms of an autoimmune disease known as ankylosing spondylitis, or spinal arthritis. At first, doctors prescribed medication to palliate the symptoms. Ultimately, however, they sought to reduce the hyperactive inflammatory response causing the symptoms.

Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan woman follows a similar trajectory. It moves past symptoms to deeper causes, then prescribes a cure.

In John 4:10–15, the conversation turns to “living water.” This is a Hebrew idiom for spring water.

Jesus said, “If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water” (verse 10).

The woman thought Jesus was talking about spring water and noted He had no implement for drawing water. She asked, “Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well and drank from it himself?” (verse 12).

Jesus replied, “Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life” (verses 13–14). In other words, Jesus is talking about salvation.

But the woman was stuck on ordinary water: “Sir, give me this water so that I won't get thirsty and have to keep coming here to draw water” (verse 15).

The woman was concerned with her immediate physical needs, as well as her social isolation. But Jesus diagnosed the deeper problem, the spiritual and theological issue — a need for eternal life, which only He could provide.

Following Jesus always takes us deep, from the physical and relational symptoms we feel to the spiritual need we may have overlooked.

If we want to persuade people to follow Jesus, we must start with their hopes and fears ... and go deeper. The depths are where real change occurs.

5. Acknowledge Pain

At this point in the story, Jesus' conversation with the woman took an unexpected turn. She had said, “Give me this water,” and He responded, “Go, call your husband and come back” (verses 15–16).

Why Jesus asked the woman to fetch her husband is not clear. What is clear is that the woman didn't want to discuss the matter. "I have no husband," she replied, which was technically true (verse 17).

Jesus acknowledged the technicality. Then, through prophetic insight (verse 19), He revealed truth about her marital and sexual history: "You have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband" (verse 18).

We don't know whether the Samaritan woman had five exes because of death, divorce, or both. And we don't know whether the sixth man was an adulterer or simply a live-in boyfriend, to use contemporary jargon.

People reading this passage often assume the Samaritan woman was a great sinner, bouncing from one man to another. But what if she had been greatly sinned *against* — cast off by husbands because of infertility or because they found another woman they desired more? What if the woman had descended so far down the social ladder the sixth man would use but not marry her?

Regardless, in her social context, villagers would have considered her a shameful woman rather than an honorable one.

Jesus didn't condemn or shame the Samaritan woman, though. The conversation didn't immediately turn to a call for repentance, nor did it outline a plan for rehabilitation.

Acknowledging her situation and the pain behind it, Jesus kept talking to her *anyway*. He entered her brokenness non-judgmentally. This doesn't mean Jesus discarded good theology or sound morals. It simply means He showed her grace.

The New Testament teaches holy living is part and parcel of following Jesus. So, no doubt the woman changed her behavior after encountering Jesus — as we all should. But to use the language of Ephesians 2:8–10, we are saved *by grace through faith for works*. Grace comes first and makes works possible.

If we want to persuade people to follow Jesus, we must do what He did. Our society is filled with broken people. We need to acknowledge their pain and brokenness, showing them grace.

Without grace, how can we ever convince people Jesus is the solution to their deepest needs?

6. Lay Foundations

At this point, the Samaritan woman pivoted to ask about the proper location of the temple.

She said, “I can see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain [Mount Gerizim], but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem” (verses 19–20).

It seems the woman is changing subjects. However, she’s finally going deep herself by asking fundamental questions.

When we go deep, we go foundational — all the way to the sources we consider authoritative.

The Samaritan woman acknowledged Jesus as a prophet (verse 19). So she asked Him a question that divided their respective communities: Where should we worship?

Jesus’ answer pointed her in three directions.

First, Jesus pointed her to Scripture. “You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews” (verse 22).

Remember, Samaritan religion was Torah based. Since it included only Genesis through Deuteronomy, it didn’t specify where the people of God were supposed to establish a centralized temple when they entered the Promised Land.

Jewish Scripture did, however. The Prophets and Writings showed God had chosen Jerusalem. One cannot answer a theological question correctly if two-thirds of the relevant information is missing.

Second, Jesus pointed the Samaritan woman to himself. “Believe me, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem” (verse 21). Here, Jesus is speaking prophetically, announcing a truth that becomes clear only after His death, resurrection, ascension, and outpouring of the Spirit.

The Old Testament is not God’s final word to humanity. The New Testament fulfills and interprets the Old Testament, explaining who Jesus is and what He has done for us.

Finally, Jesus outlined the proper response to biblical revelation: “A time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks” (verse 23).

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The issue of authority is unavoidable. When it arises, we need to be clear and forthright, pointing others to God's Word. We must be prepared to explain its meaning, defend its truth, and invite others to respond.

7. Invite a Response

The internet deludes us into thinking we can know anything at any time. Social media suggests we must have an opinion right now. Consequently, we assume persuasion should be easy and quick.

This mentality can lead to unhelpful attitudes toward evangelism. We act as if a short conversation is all it takes to convince people to change their life's direction. And once they've done that, we can move on to the next potential convert.

In reality, persuading people to follow Jesus requires crossing boundaries, being authentic, and asking questions. It forces us to go deeper, acknowledge pain, and lay biblical foundations.

This can take time, or it can happen relatively quickly. Jesus persuaded the Samaritan woman through one conversation, but He persuaded other Samaritans over the course of multiple days (verses 39–41). At some point, though, decisions have to be made.

In today's lexicon, any kind of honest reckoning or sudden realization may be described as a "come-to-Jesus moment." For example, someone might say, "I had a come-to-Jesus moment about what junk food was doing to my health."

Persuasive Christians will lead seekers to literal come-to-Jesus moments.

Scripture invites us to come to Jesus — not because He's going to chew us out, but because He loves us and wants to reconcile us to God and other people.

That's what happens with the Samaritan woman. Responding to her remark about the Messiah, Jesus says, "I, the one speaking to you — I am he" (verse 26).

Jesus is not just a prophet; He is the Messiah. And yet, John seems to be telling us Jesus is even more than that.

In Greek grammar, *ego eimi* is a way of saying, "I am he." Theologically, however, it echoes the way God talked about himself.

It parallels the Greek translation of Exodus 3:14, where God tells Moses, "I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: 'I AM has sent me to you.'"

Throughout John's Gospel, Jesus uses "I am" language in ways that point to His divinity. In John 8:58, for example, Jesus said, "Before Abraham was born, I am!"

Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman is a story about the eternal God entering time and space in the man Jesus Christ, crossing boundaries, getting real, asking questions, acknowledging pain, going deeper, and laying foundations — all because He wants to draw us to himself and give us the living water of eternal life.

Who wouldn't want to worship that kind of God in spirit and truth?

If we hope to persuade people to become Christians, we must tell them this story about God and invite them to a point of decision about Jesus.

Ultimately, Jesus persuaded both the Samaritan woman and many in her village to follow Him (John 4:39–42). Remarkably, these Samaritans came to recognize Jesus as “the Savior of the world” (verse 42).

These seven practices aren't a foolproof method of persuasion, unfortunately. During the course of His ministry, many believed Jesus, but others didn't. Indeed, some crucified Him.

Nonetheless, His example of persuasiveness is useful for evangelizing people in a deeply divided culture, whether in first-century Samaria or 21st-century America.

In the midst of deep ethnic and religious fractures, Jesus made time to talk with someone on the other side of the divide, and in doing so opened to her the doors of eternal life.

As our culture becomes increasingly nonreligious, and in some cases actively hostile, are we willing to do what Jesus did?

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