GARDEN

Relational Evangelism Study

PARTICIPANT GUIDE

Week 2 - The GARDEN Way of Evangelism
Intentional Without Being Forced

BIG IDEA

Relational evangelism is neither passive nor manipulative. We can intentionally cultivate opportunities to point people toward Christ while respecting the person, the relationship, and God's role in producing growth.

G - Grow Relationships A - Ask Thoughtful Questions R - Reflect & Research

D - Direct to Helpful Resources E - Engage Over Time N - Nurture Through Prayer

How to Use This Study

Read the material aloud together, switching readers at each section break. When you reach a **DISCUSS** section, pause and discuss the questions as a group. When you reach a **REFLECT** or **MY STAGE THREE PROJECT** section, take a few minutes to write individually before continuing. Unless otherwise noted, Scripture passages should also be read aloud together.

> **No one needs to teach the lesson. Work through it together.**

Scripture First

As you read **John 4:4-30**, pay attention to the way Jesus engages the Samaritan woman. Notice: **where the conversation begins; the questions Jesus asks; how the conversation becomes spiritual; how directly Jesus eventually speaks; and whether Jesus seems hurried to get to the end of the conversation.**

John 4:4-30

DISCUSS

1. Where does the conversation begin, and where does it eventually go?

2. What do you notice about the way Jesus moves the conversation forward?

3. Where does Jesus ask questions? Where does he make direct statements?

4. What does Jesus appear to understand about this woman beyond the words she initially says?

5. What can we learn from this conversation without assuming that every evangelistic conversation should look exactly like it?

Conversations Have Movement

Jesus begins by asking for water.

Before the conversation ends, they are talking about **Jewish and Samaritan relations, living water, her personal life, worship, the Messiah** - and ultimately Jesus identifies himself to her.

The conversation has **movement**. That's important.

Relational evangelism doesn't mean waiting indefinitely and hoping that someday the other person brings up Jesus.

But it also doesn't mean forcing every conversation toward a memorized presentation.

> **We can learn to recognize opportunities and intentionally move conversations toward meaningful spiritual questions.**

Sometimes that movement happens naturally. Sometimes we create a small opening with a question. Sometimes someone else opens the door. Sometimes we realize the door isn't open at all.

Wisdom includes learning the difference.

Two Ditches

Ditch One - Passivity

> **"I don't want to force anything. If they ever want to talk about God, they'll bring it up."**

This sounds respectful. Sometimes it is. But sometimes it becomes an excuse for doing nothing.

Years can pass. We care about someone deeply. We pray for them occasionally. We hope they eventually come to Christ. But we never ask a meaningful question, mention what we believe, share something that might help, or create an opportunity for a deeper conversation.

That isn't necessarily patience. Sometimes it's **passivity**.

Ditch Two - Pressure

The opposite mistake is treating every interaction like an evangelistic assignment.

We force transitions. We ask questions we don't really care about because they lead to our next point. We listen only long enough to formulate a response. We send resources nobody asked for. We turn someone's suffering into an opening for an argument.

We become more interested in advancing the conversation than understanding the person.

That isn't intentionality. Sometimes it's **pressure**.

DISCUSS

Which ditch do you think Christians are more likely to fall into - passivity or pressure? Why?

Which one are you personally more likely to fall into?

How can fear disguise itself as "respecting the relationship"?

How can impatience disguise itself as "boldness"?

Intentional Without Being Forced

GARDEN is designed to occupy the space between those two ditches.

We want to become **intentional without becoming forced**.

Think again about gardening. A gardener does not make a seed grow. But a gardener isn't passive.

The gardener prepares soil. Plants. Waters. Removes obstacles. Pays attention. Returns later. And waits.

There is intentional activity throughout the process, even though the gardener cannot manufacture life.

That picture fits what we saw last week:

> **"I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth."**

GARDEN gives us six practices for becoming more intentional about planting and watering.

G - Grow Relationships

Before someone is an atheist, Muslim, Mormon, agnostic, skeptic, progressive, Buddhist, or "none," they are a **person**.

They have a story. Relationships. Hopes. Fears. Experiences. Questions. Contradictions. Reasons for believing what they believe - and probably reasons they don't completely understand themselves.

Growing relationships means genuinely caring about people whether or not a spiritual conversation happens today. It means being present, remembering what matters to them, serving them, enjoying them, listening,

building trust, and allowing relationships to be real relationships.

> **The relationship isn't the bait. The person actually matters.**

But genuine relationship also shouldn't become an excuse for never discussing the most important things in life. Love can listen. Love can serve. Love can also ask. Love can speak.

A - Ask Thoughtful Questions

Questions are one of the most useful tools in relational evangelism.

Sometimes we ask because we genuinely need information: **"What do you mean by that?"**

Sometimes because we want to understand someone's story: **"Have you always thought that way about Christianity?"**

Sometimes because we want to understand their reasoning: **"What makes you think that's true?"**

And sometimes a question helps someone examine an assumption they may never have seriously considered: **"If morality is entirely subjective, in what sense could something like slavery actually be wrong?"**

A good question can clarify. It can reveal assumptions. It can expose contradictions. It can appropriately place the burden of proof on the person making a claim. And sometimes it simply keeps a good conversation going.

We will spend all of **Week 4** developing this skill.

> **You don't always need an answer to take a conversation one step deeper. Sometimes you need a question.**

R - Reflect & Research

One of the most freeing things about GARDEN is that the conversation doesn't have to be finished while you're standing in it.

Someone says: *"Christianity just borrowed the resurrection story from earlier pagan religions."* You don't know enough to respond. That's okay.

You can listen. Ask questions. Remember what they said. And later: **Reflect.** What exactly was the claim? What did they mean? What assumptions were underneath it? What do I need to know?

Then: **Research.** What is the strongest version of the objection? How have thoughtful Christians responded? What does Scripture actually teach? What historical, philosophical, or scientific information is relevant?

And then you can return:

> **"I was thinking about what you said the other day..."**

That sentence may become one of the most useful phrases in this entire study. Evangelism doesn't always have to happen in one conversation.

D - Direct to Helpful Resources

Sometimes the best thing you can give someone isn't your explanation. It's someone else's.

A short video. An article. A podcast. A book. A debate. A Bible passage. A conversation with someone who knows more than you do.

The goal isn't to bury someone under information. It's to find the **right resource for the right person at the right time**.

A forty-five-minute philosophical lecture might be perfect for one friend and completely useless for another. A five-minute video might be enough to get someone thinking. A book might be appropriate only after several conversations.

Directing someone to a resource also gives you a natural reason to follow up: **"Did you ever get a chance to watch that?"** And now the conversation continues.

E - Engage Over Time

This may be the most distinctive part of the GARDEN approach.

We're not thinking only about: *How do I have an evangelistic conversation?*

We're thinking about: **How do I faithfully engage this person over time?**

One conversation might reveal a question. The next might clarify what they actually believe. Later you share a resource. Two weeks afterward you ask what they thought. Months later a life event creates a completely different conversation.

You ask. Listen. Reflect. Research. Return. Plant. Water. And continue living life together.

> **Don't judge the significance of a conversation only by what happened during the conversation.**

Sometimes the important part happens later when the person is alone and continues thinking.

N - Nurture Through Prayer

Prayer isn't merely the final letter because we needed an N. It surrounds everything else.

We pray before opportunities exist. We pray while relationships develop. We pray after conversations. We pray while researching. We pray when someone seems interested. We pray when someone seems completely closed.

We pray because Week 1 established something fundamental:

> **God gives the growth.**

Prayer reminds us that GARDEN isn't ultimately a technique for producing conversion. We're asking God to do something we cannot do.

The GARDEN Framework

G - Grow Relationships

Love the person and cultivate genuine relationship.

A - Ask Thoughtful Questions

Understand what they believe and help them think more deeply.

R - Reflect & Research

Think about the conversation afterward and prepare where necessary.

D - Direct to Helpful Resources

Connect the person with something useful beyond yourself.

E - Engage Over Time

Return to important conversations rather than treating them as one-time events.

N - Nurture Through Prayer

Pray throughout the entire process and trust God for the growth.

GARDEN isn't necessarily a six-step sequence.

You won't always: **G -> A -> R -> D -> E -> N**

A real relationship may look more like: **G -> N -> G -> A -> R -> N -> E -> A -> R -> D -> E -> N**

That's normal. GARDEN isn't a script.

> **It's a way of becoming more intentional about relationships and conversations that are already happening.**

REFLECT

Think About Your Person

Return to the person you chose last week. Consider each part of GARDEN.

G - Grow Relationships

What is the current state of our relationship?

Am I genuinely present in this person's life apart from evangelism?

A - Ask Thoughtful Questions

What do I genuinely want to understand about this person's beliefs?

R - Reflect & Research

Has this person ever said something about God, Christianity, morality, science, suffering, the Bible, or another spiritual issue that I didn't know how to respond to?

D - Direct to Helpful Resources

Have I ever shared something spiritual with this person? What happened?

E - Engage Over Time

Have we had spiritual conversations that I never followed up on?

N - Nurture Through Prayer

Have I been consistently praying for this person since last week? What have I been praying?

The Person Before the Issue

Last week you chose a person. This week we're going to begin identifying an issue. But the order matters.

> **Person first. Issue second.**

Suppose your friend says: *"I could never believe in a God who sends people to hell."* You might immediately think: *Great. My topic is hell.* Maybe. But not necessarily.

What does your friend actually mean? Perhaps they believe hell is morally unjust. Perhaps someone they loved died without professing Christianity. Perhaps they were raised in a church where hell was used to terrify children. Perhaps their deeper objection is the exclusivity of Christianity. Perhaps they don't believe in God for completely different reasons and hell is simply one additional objection.

Until you understand the person, you may not even understand the objection.

What Is Underneath the Question?

People don't arrive at beliefs through arguments alone.

Sometimes a person's objection is primarily **intellectual**: *"There isn't sufficient evidence that God exists."*

Sometimes it is strongly **experiential**: *"I prayed when my mother was dying and nothing happened."*

Sometimes it is **moral**: *"I think Christian sexual ethics are harmful."*

Sometimes it is **social**: *"Every intelligent person I know thinks religion is ridiculous."*

Sometimes it is based on a **misunderstanding**: *"The Bible teaches that the earth is 6,000 years old, so science disproves Christianity."*

Often several of these are tangled together. This is one reason listening matters so much.

If you answer the intellectual question while ignoring the personal wound underneath it, you may give a perfectly good answer to a question the person isn't really asking.

On the other hand, we shouldn't assume every objection is secretly emotional. Sometimes someone simply has a good intellectual question and wants a good intellectual answer.

> **Take both the person and the argument seriously.**

DISCUSS

> **"People don't believe primarily because they don't want to believe."**

What might be true about that statement?

What might be dangerous about it?

How could assuming we already know someone's motives prevent us from actually listening to them?

MY STAGE THREE PROJECT

Week 2 - Identify the Issue

Last week you chose a person. This week, identify **one question, objection, belief, or barrier that may be important to that person.**

Don't worry yet about whether you know how to answer it. And don't manufacture an objection for them. Ideally, choose something they have actually said or clearly expressed.

My person - First name: _____

Something this person has actually said or expressed:

In my own words, I think the issue might be:

Which category seems most relevant?

■ God / atheism
■ Jesus / Christianity
■ Bible / history
■ Science / faith
■ Philosophy / worldview
■ Another religion or worldview
■ Culture / ethics
■ Christian life / hypocrisy / church experience
■ Theology / doctrine
■ Something else: _____

What might be underneath the issue? Check any that **might** apply. These are possibilities, not conclusions.

■ Intellectual ■ Experiential ■ Moral ■ Social
■ Misunderstanding ■ Something else: _____ ■ I don't know yet

What do I still need to understand from this person?

Write one question you could naturally ask someday to understand the issue better.

Your job this week is not to solve the objection. Your job is to understand it better.

Conversation in Practice

Imagine a coworker says:

> **"I just don't believe there's any evidence for God."**

Response One

> **"That's ridiculous. There's tons of evidence for God. Have you ever studied the cosmological argument?"**

Response Two

> **"Oh. Okay."**

And the conversation ends.

Response Three

> **"When you say there's no evidence for God, what kind of evidence do you think we should expect if God exists?"**

DISCUSS

What are the strengths and weaknesses of each response?

What does Response Three allow you to learn that the other responses don't?

Does asking the question mean you can never eventually challenge the claim directly?

Now imagine the person answers: *"I don't know. I guess something scientific."*

You now know something you didn't know thirty seconds earlier. And you have another possible question:

> **"What would count as scientific evidence for something that isn't itself a physical object?"**

You still haven't given an argument. But the conversation has moved.

That's Stage Two beginning to develop.

Discussion

1. Which part of GARDEN comes most naturally to you? Which part is most difficult?

2. How can we intentionally move a relationship toward spiritual conversation without making the relationship feel artificial?

3. What's the difference between creating an opportunity and forcing an opportunity?

4. Why might asking questions sometimes be more effective than immediately giving an answer?

5. When can sharing a resource be helpful? When can it become a substitute for actually engaging the person?

6. Why is follow-up so important? Compare: “Here's a video you should watch” with “I was thinking about our conversation. I found something that addresses the question you raised. If you're interested, I'd be curious what you think about it.”

7. What dangers arise when we assume we know why someone rejects Christianity?

8. Which is harder for you personally: starting spiritual conversations, knowing what to say once they begin, or returning to them later? Why?

This Week in the GARDEN

This week, continue what you began in Week 1. But add one new objective:

> **Understand before trying to answer.**

GROW

Do something that simply contributes to the relationship. Not as an evangelistic technique. Because the person matters.

ASK

If an appropriate opportunity arises, ask **one genuine question** about something the person believes. You do not need to challenge them. Try to understand.

REFLECT

Afterward, ask yourself: **What did I actually learn? What did I assume before the conversation? Did anything surprise me?**

RECORD

Add what you learned to your Evangelism Profile or notes. Be careful to distinguish **what they actually said** from **what you think it means**.

PRAY

Continue praying for your person by name. And begin praying:

> **"God, help me understand this person well enough to love them wisely and represent Christ faithfully."**

Pray Together

Pray again for the people you've chosen.

This week, add a specific request:

> **Ask God for wisdom to understand the person before trying to answer the person.**

Pray for genuine relationships. Natural opportunities. Good questions. Patient listening. Discernment. And courage when an opportunity actually requires you to speak.

Before Week 3

Bring your Stage Three Project notes next week.

You should now have: **One person. One possible issue. A growing understanding of what you still don't know.**

Next week we're going to confront one of the biggest barriers to evangelism:

"What if I don't know the answer?"

We'll learn why not knowing doesn't have to end a conversation - and how a difficult question can actually become the beginning of better preparation.