GARDEN

Relational Evangelism Study

PARTICIPANT GUIDE

Week 6 - Know the Person, Not Just the Objection
Truth, Wisdom, and a Personal Response

BIG IDEA

A good answer is not automatically a wise answer for this moment. Faithful evangelism takes both truth and the actual person seriously.

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 **1 Corinthians 9:19-23**, listen for what changes in Paul's approach and what does **not** change. Then read **Colossians 4:5-6** and notice the words **wisdom**, **gracious**, and **each person**.

1 Corinthians 9:19-23 and Colossians 4:5-6

DISCUSS

1. What is Paul willing to adapt for the sake of reaching different people?

2. What does Paul refuse to surrender or become?

3. What might it mean for our speech to be "gracious" and appropriate for "each person"?

4. Why might the same true statement need to be explained differently to different people?

5. What dangers appear if we emphasize adaptation without truth? What dangers appear if we emphasize truth without wisdom?

A Correct Answer Can Still Miss the Person

Last week you worked on the substance of your Stage Three response.

You tried to understand the objection fairly, identify the Christian claim, find reasons and evidence, anticipate follow-ups, and choose a resource.

Now imagine you have done all of that well.

You finally have a strong answer.

But there is another question:

> **Do you understand the person well enough to know how to use it?**

A technically correct response can still be poorly timed, unnecessarily complicated, insensitive to the person's experience, or aimed at the wrong issue.

This does not make truth relative.

> **The truth does not change from person to person. Wisdom asks how to communicate that truth faithfully to this person.**

Same Question, Different Person

Consider two people who both say:

> **"How could a good God allow suffering?"**

Person One

A college student has been reading atheist philosophers and wants to know whether the existence of evil makes belief in God logically inconsistent.

Person Two

A friend asks the same question three days after losing a child.

The words are similar.

The human situation is not.

Person One may welcome a philosophical distinction immediately.

Person Two may need your presence, grief, prayer, and patience long before an argument is appropriate.

> **The argument may be relevant to both. Wisdom helps us recognize when and how it should enter the conversation.**

Five Things to Know Beyond the Objection

1. Their Story

What experiences have shaped the way this person thinks about God and Christianity?

Did they grow up in church? Were they never religious? Did they have a positive or harmful church experience? Have they changed beliefs before? Has suffering affected the way they see God?

You are not searching for a hidden psychological explanation that makes their argument disappear.

> **You are learning the story in which the question lives.**

2. Their Actual Beliefs

Labels can hide enormous differences.

Two people who call themselves "atheist" may mean very different things. Two Catholics, Muslims, Mormons, agnostics, or "spiritual" people may understand their own traditions very differently.

Do not assume a label tells you everything.

> **Ask the person what they believe, not merely what people in their category are supposed to believe.**

3. Their Reasons

What does this person think supports their view?

Are their reasons historical? Scientific? Philosophical? Moral? Experiential? Social? A mixture?

This is where Week 4 questions become especially useful.

> **The same conclusion can be reached by very different roads. The road matters if you hope to have a meaningful conversation.**

4. Their Temperament and Communication Style

Some people enjoy long arguments. Some hate them. Some want books. Some will never read one. Some process by talking. Some need time alone. Some appreciate direct disagreement. Others need to know you understand them before they can hear a challenge.

This does not mean truth should be softened until nobody is uncomfortable.

It means communication should be wise.

5. The Relationship and the Moment

A question from your spouse is different from the same question from a coworker you barely know. A conversation during lunch is different from a conversation during a family crisis.

Relational history affects what can be said, how directly it can be said, and how much trust already exists.

> **Ask not only, "Is this true?" but also, "Is this the wise moment and manner for saying it?"**

Do Not Psychoanalyze the Unbeliever

There is a temptation in apologetics to explain an objection away by assigning a motive.

> **"He says the evidence is weak, but really he just does not want moral accountability."**
>
> **"She says Christians are hypocrites, but really she is angry at God."**

Those things may sometimes be factors.

But unless the person has actually told you, you do not know.

Romans teaches that sin affects humanity deeply. Scripture also shows that people can suppress truth. But biblical teaching about the human condition does not make us experts on the private motives of the individual sitting across from us.

> **Theology should make us discerning, not presumptuous.**

Take the stated argument seriously. Take the person's experiences seriously. Ask questions. Let them tell you what matters.

DISCUSS

Why is motive-reading tempting?

How can assigning motives prevent us from answering a legitimate objection?

How can we acknowledge the spiritual dimensions of unbelief without pretending to know another person's heart?

What kinds of questions might help someone tell their own story rather than having us explain it for them?

Truth and Compassion Are Not Competitors

Sometimes Christians fear that taking someone's pain seriously will weaken the apologetic response.

Others fear that offering an argument during a painful issue is inherently cold.

Neither conclusion follows.

Jesus could weep at Lazarus' tomb and still speak truth about resurrection and life.

Christianity gives us reasons to care about both the truth of a worldview and the suffering of the person considering it.

> **Compassion without truth can leave important questions unanswered. Truth without compassion can make a true answer unnecessarily difficult to hear.**

The goal is not a fifty-fifty compromise.

The goal is faithful love.

Listen for the Question Behind the Question

Sometimes the first question is not the central one.

Someone says:

> **"Why are Christians so obsessed with sexual morality?"**

Perhaps they want a philosophical discussion about moral authority.

Perhaps a family member came out as gay and they are trying to understand how Christianity relates to someone they love.

Perhaps they were treated cruelly by Christians.

Perhaps they simply think Christian ethics are false.

You cannot know which by guessing.

A question such as:

> **"Is there something in particular that makes this issue important to you?"**

may reveal what kind of conversation you are actually having.

Personalize the Explanation, Not the Truth

Suppose your Stage Three topic is evidence for the resurrection.

Your research may include historical facts, competing explanations, New Testament sources, and arguments about the best explanation.

How you present that material may differ.

For the Analytical Friend

You may lay out the historical case in a structured way and compare explanatory hypotheses.

For the Skeptical Friend Who Distrusts Christian Sources

You may spend more time explaining which claims are accepted beyond conservative Christian scholarship and why source evaluation matters.

For the Friend with Little Background

You may need to begin much more simply by explaining what Christians actually claim happened.

For the Friend Who Has Been Hurt by Christians

You may need to acknowledge that Christian failure is real while distinguishing the truth of Christ from the failures of his followers.

The core truth has not changed.

> **The route into the explanation has changed because the person matters.**

The Resource Should Fit the Person

Week 5 asked you to choose a resource. Week 6 asks you to look at it again through the eyes of your person.

A two-hour debate may be excellent and still be the wrong resource.

A popular video may be accessible but too combative for someone already wounded by Christians.

A technical article may be perfect for an engineer and frustrating for someone who wants a simple overview.

Ask:

> **Would this person actually use this?**
> **Will the tone help or distract?**
> **Does it address their real concern?**
> **Is the difficulty appropriate?**
> **Does it invite further conversation?**

Sometimes the best resource is not something you send.

It may be something you study so that **you** can become a better conversation partner.

Conversation in Practice

Imagine your friend says:

> **"I stopped believing after my dad died. Everyone told me God had a plan, but it just sounded cruel."**

You have recently studied the problem of evil and can explain several philosophical responses.

Response One

> **"Actually, suffering does not logically disprove God. Let me explain the free will defense."**

Response Two

> **"I am really sorry. What was your dad like?"**

Response Three - Later

> **"You said something before that I keep thinking about - that people telling you God had a plan sounded cruel. I can understand why that phrase would land badly. Do you think what happened made you feel that a good God probably does not exist, or is it more that you could not trust a God who would allow it?"**

Response Two is not the complete Christian response to suffering.

But it may be the wise response in the moment.

Response Three begins to understand the actual objection without ignoring the grief.

A philosophical explanation may eventually be useful. Now it can answer a question you understand more clearly.

DISCUSS

What is wrong with Response One in this particular moment - if anything?

Why is Response Two not an abandonment of apologetics?

What does Response Three help clarify?

When might it become appropriate to offer a substantive Christian response?

How would you know whether the person wants an answer, wants to be heard, or wants both?

REFLECT - What Do I Actually Know About My Person?

Return to the person in your Stage Three Project. Answer only from what you genuinely know. Use "I don't know" where appropriate.

What experiences have shaped this person's view of Christianity?

What has this person actually told me they believe?

What reasons have they given?

How do they prefer to process difficult ideas - conversation, reading, video, debate, time alone, something else?

What parts of my current picture are assumptions rather than things I know?

What do I still need to ask or learn?

MY STAGE THREE PROJECT

Week 6 - Personalize the Response

You now have a researched response. This week, shape it for the real person you chose in Week 1.

My person: _____

My issue:

1. PERSON - What about this person's story, beliefs, reasons, or experiences matters for this conversation?

2. OPENING - What would be a natural way to return to or begin this conversation?

3. QUESTIONS - Of the questions I developed in Week 4, which 2-3 fit this person best?

4. EXPLANATION - Rewrite or adjust my short explanation so it sounds natural for this person. Keep the truth intact; change the language, emphasis, or depth where useful.

5. SENSITIVITY - Is there anything about timing, experience, relationship, or tone I need to handle carefully?

6. RESOURCE - Is the resource I chose in Week 5 actually appropriate for this person? Keep it, replace it, or decide not to share one yet.

7. WHAT I STILL DO NOT KNOW - What do I need to learn from the person rather than from research?

> **A personalized response is not a manipulated response. It is a truthful response offered with wisdom to a person you have taken the time to know.**

When Not to Give the Answer

Prepared Christians sometimes develop a new temptation.

We finally know the answer - so we want to use it.

But wisdom may sometimes say:

> **Not yet.**

Perhaps the person is grieving. Perhaps they asked a passing question but do not want a forty-minute discussion. Perhaps you have misunderstood the concern. Perhaps the relationship needs repair. Perhaps another person is better equipped to help.

Being prepared means you **can** answer.

Wisdom helps determine whether you **should answer now** and how much.

> **Preparation gives you options. Love helps you choose among them.**

This is one reason GARDEN is designed for the long game.

Discussion

1. Why is a correct answer not always the right first response?

2. How can we adapt our communication without changing the truth?

3. What is the difference between understanding someone's story and psychoanalyzing them?

4. How do we know when someone needs compassion, an argument, a question, or some combination?

5. What assumptions do Christians commonly make about atheists, agnostics, people of other religions, or people hurt by the church?

6. When can an apologetics resource actually make a conversation worse?

7. How can being highly prepared create its own temptation to talk too much?

8. What would it look like for someone to feel genuinely understood by you even if they strongly disagree with your Christian conclusion?

This Week in the GARDEN

This week, move from knowing the issue to knowing how the issue lives in the person.

PAY ATTENTION

Notice what your person values, how they communicate, and what experiences seem relevant. Do not turn observation into speculation.

ASK

If appropriate, ask one question that helps you understand the person's story or reasons more clearly.

ADAPT

Practice your Stage Three explanation in language that would make sense to this person. Remove unnecessary jargon.

RECONSIDER THE RESOURCE

Ask whether your selected resource actually fits. It is okay to replace it or decide not to share anything yet.

PRAY

Ask God for wisdom to know when to speak, when to ask, when to listen, and when to wait.

Pray Together

Pray for your Stage Three people as whole people, not merely as holders of objections.

Pray for their relationships, struggles, questions, circumstances, and spiritual lives. Ask God to give you **love without manipulation, truth without arrogance, compassion without avoidance, and wisdom for each person.**

Before Week 7

Bring your complete Stage Three work next week: your understanding of the issue, questions, researched response, likely follow-ups, resource, and personalized approach.

Next week we put the pieces together in a realistic conversation.

Week 7 - Putting It All Together

You will practice moving naturally between listening, questions, explanation, objections, admitting what you still do not know, and follow-up - without turning the conversation into a script.