



## Holy Conference: “A Kinde of Paradise”

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In the current spiritual formation culture, it is easy to equate our spirituality with undertaking spiritual disciplines. There is a temptation to think of spiritual formation as the result of a formula—that if I just do certain activities, I’ll be mature. Frustration can set in, however, when we don’t see any immediate change. It helps to remember that our spiritual transformation is a lifelong process and that we are not left alone in this undertaking. Indeed, each of the members of the Trinity plays a part.

The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit have roles, functions, and power in designing, modeling, and strengthening us in this endeavor of receiving and allowing God’s grace to grow and strengthen our faith. God is constantly extending his grace to us, inviting us to spend time with him and become like him. His goal is to make us like Christ. The power to accomplish this is the abiding presence of his Spirit. When we understand that almighty God is at work in us for our spiritual formation, we can feel that a huge weight has been lifted from us.

Our journey of experiencing God’s commitment to transform us more into the likeness of Christ began with his grace and will continue by means of that same grace. Spiritual formation requires a lifestyle of knowing and responding to this grace. Our individual responses take place in community. Spiritual formation has always been a communal activity, but our society’s hyper-individualistic and isolationistic trends for defining and finding personal success contradict the rhythms of spiritual growth. As children of God, however, we have received an incomparable helper and gift. The Holy Spirit now lives in us, transforming our lives to be living, breathing proof of his grace and signposts that point others to God.

God, in his commitment to transform us, provides various means as conduits to experience his grace.

The seventeenth-century saintly John Preston said this about the means of grace:

*You must take heed of depending upon the means without GOD. For know that the meanes without God, is but as a penne without Inke, a Pipe without water, or a scabberd without a sword. They will not strengthen the inward man without God: for it is the Spirit that puts life in the meanes, and yet you must not cut off the pipe from the well-head; you must not depend on God without the meanes, but you must use both: that is, first seeke to God, and depend upon him for the strengthening of the inward man, and withal use the meanes constantly, because as water is carried from the Well-head unto the pipe, and so from the pipe unto many places, so the meanes are as pipes to carry grace into the soule: Therefore use them, and cut them not off by carelessness; if you doe, you will cut off the strength of the inward man.<sup>1</sup>*



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God esteems us by his invitation to participate with him in the process of spiritual transformation. Under the direction, guidance, and power of the Trinity, and with our cooperation, these means can be particularly helpful in our walk with God.

Some might call them spiritual disciplines—but they would be correct—but the emphasis in using “means of grace” is on the actions of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in transforming us. We are invited to *engage with* God’s Spirit as we *engage in* God-given means for our transformation. We become more attentive to God’s stirring in our souls while plumbing the spiritual depths in becoming who we are intended to be. The more we are changed, the more we long

to be changed. God uses the means of grace to cultivate our familiarity with his movements and voice. In conjunction with his written Word, by his Spirit, our hearts become more prone to recognize his presence in our lives and better able to recognize the obstacles that thwart our obedience. Progressively, over time, we grow in godliness.

One such effective means of grace is observed of an era from our past. Our Puritan-era forebears called this “holy conference” or holy conversation.

### Food for Thought

Between ancient and recent church history lies an often overlooked period of time when great authority was given to the words of Scripture and when growing in faith was accomplished in community. The words of the Bible became the litmus test for authentic and devoted lives. Weighing life against anything else was futile and led to a preoccupation with self and thus a meaningless existence. This characterizes the English Puritans of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Conference was an important means of grace. A careful observation of a conversation between Christian and Hopeful—protagonists in John Bunyan’s (1628–1688) *Pilgrim’s Progress*—as they discuss the plight of believers who backslide from faith, reveals the vital need for the exercise of this means. Christian’s response includes the lack of conference as a cause of such spiritual decline: “They shun the company of lively and warm Christians”; and “After that they grow cold to public duty, as hearing, reading, godly conference, and the like.” Godly conference is identified here as a profitable discipline whose neglect leads to a compromise in spiritual wellness.

In his autobiography Bunyan himself recalled a group of poor women sitting at a sunny doorway conversing about the things of God:

*I may say, “I heard but understood not”; for they were far above, out of my reach. Their talk was about a new birth, the work of God on their hearts, also how they were convinced of their miserable state by nature; they talked how God had visited their souls with His love in the Lord Jesus, and with what words and promises they had been refreshed, comforted, and supported, against the temptations of the devil.<sup>2</sup>*

Bunyan had found something new. He confessed, “They were to me, as if they had found a new world.”<sup>3</sup> His subsequent times in meeting and conversing with these women stirred the questioning of his own soul and prompted godly meditation.

Historically, pastors conferenced with other pastors and their congregants on matters of Scripture and of the soul. Parishioners conferenced with their peers, heads of households with all those living under their care, and parents with their children. Engaging in serendipitous conversations interjected with the language of biblical truth and soul care was also considered to be “holy conference.” And when face-to-face encounters were not possible, letters were written expressing the same deep level of concern for biblical truth and attentiveness to the heart.

Time and distance did not diminish the desire to foster soul care and biblical knowledge. A portion of a letter from Jonathan Michel pictures this desire:

*But yet considering some passages in your last and former Letters concerning your Spiritual Condition, and knowing by experience in my self the reality of such Complaints, I would not be so graceless as to neglect you wholly therein: And though I can say or do very little, yet a word or two might be of some use; nor do I know what guilt might lye upon me, if I should be silent or slight in this Case! And therefore [Dear —] if my barren heart would suffer me, I would present you with a few words, as if you and I were alone in a Corner in the presence of God.<sup>4</sup>*

The ease of spiritual drift, of losing track of the “true north” of biblical knowledge and spiritual growth, can be remedied by godly conference. Stepping out from the archives, we cannot help observing the delight and “paradise” that was intended to be employed and enjoyed in conference. We take with us an affirmation of the need and the idea that this manner of community can be experienced.

### Letting the Word Speak

Each of the following verses (English Standard Version) that lend biblical support for conference is followed by an explanatory comment from an English Puritan cleric.

### Old Testament

*Psalm 37:30: The mouth of the righteous utters wisdom, // and his tongue speaks justice.*

A person whose heart is grounded in God’s law speaks with wisdom that is superior to any the world has to offer.

*A gracious person hath not only Religion in his heart, but in his tongue. The Law of God is in his heart, and his tongue talketh of Judgement: he drops holy words as*

*Pearls. 'Tis the fault of Christians, that they do not in company provoke themselves to set good discourse on foot: it is a sinfull modesty: there is much visiting, but they do not give one another's souls a visit. In worldly things their tongue is as a Pen of a ready Writer; but in matters of Religion, they are as if their tongue did cleave to the roof of their mouth. As we must answer to God for idle words; so for sinfull silence.*<sup>5</sup>

–Thomas Watson (d. 1686)

**Psalm 66:16:** *Come and hear, all you who fear God, // and I will tell what he has done for my soul.*

Found in the thanksgiving portion of a hymn of descriptive praise, the psalmist entreats “all who fear God,” which included Israelites and believers from other nations, to witness his words of testimony of God’s gracious deliverance.

*Thus [Christians] when you meet, give one anothers Souls a visit, drop your Knowledge, impart your experiences each to other.*<sup>6</sup>

–Thomas Watson

**Psalm 119:11–13:** *I have stored up your word in my heart, // that I might not sin against you. / Blessed are you, O Lord; // teach me your statutes! / With my lips I declare // all the rules of your mouth.*

The Christian is to speak the word of God to others. Our speech mirrors the stirrings of the heart.

*[The psalmist] telleth us, that if we will speak profitably unto others, we must first have the word within us; and that not lightly floating in our brain, but deeply settled and hidden in our hearts.*<sup>7</sup>

–Nicholas Brownd (d. 1613)

**Proverbs 27:17:** *Iron sharpens iron, // and one man sharpens another.*

This kind of sharpening was understood to be the interaction between friends that effected a positive change in personality or character.

*“In naturall things man standeth in neede of helpe, then much more in spirituall things he standeth in neede of others. And as iron sharpeneth iron, so one friend another, Pro. 27. And as two eies see more, two eares heare more, and two hands can doe more than one, so this is a speciall communion of Saints...”<sup>8</sup>*

–Richard Greenham (d. 1594)

**Malachi 3:16:** *Then those who feared the Lord spoke with one another. The Lord paid attention and heard them, and a book of remembrance was written before him of those who feared the Lord and esteemed his name.*

The Puritans frequently cited this passage to support holy conference. In the comments cited here, sense the passion they had for the purposes and benefits God intended for this practice. Evidence that this passion continued beyond the Puritan era is revealed in the following quote from Matthew Henry’s (1662–1714) commentary on this verse:

*They spoke often to one another concerning the God they feared, and that name of his which they thought so much of; for out of the abundance of the heart the mouth will speak, and a good man, out of a good treasure there, will bring forth good things. Those that feared the Lord kept together as those that were company for each other; they spoke kindly and endearingly one to another, for the preserving and promoting of mutual love, that that might not wax cold when iniquity did thus abound. They spoke intelligently and edifyingly to one another, for the increasing and improving of faith and holiness; they spoke one to another in the language of those that fear the Lord and think on his name—the language of Canaan. When profaneness had come to so great a height as to trample upon all that is sacred, then those that feared the Lord spoke often one to another.*

*He took notice of their pious discourses, and was graciously present at their conferences . . . The gracious God observes all the gracious words that proceed out of the mouths of his people; they need not desire that men may hear them, and commend them; let them not seek praise from men by them, nor affect to be taken notice of by them; but let it satisfy them that, be the conference ever so private, God sees and hears in secret and will reward openly. When the two disciples, going to Emmaus, were discoursing concerning Christ, he hearkened and heard, and joined himself to them, and made a third.*

*He kept an account of them . . . Not that the Eternal Mind needs to be reminded of things by book and writings, but it is an expression after the manner of men, intimating that their pious affections and performances are kept in remembrance as punctually and particularly as if they were written in a book, as if journals were kept of all their conferences . . . Never was any good word spoken of God, or for God, from an honest heart, but it was registered, that it might be recompensed in the resurrection of the just, and in no wise lose its reward.<sup>9</sup>*

## New Testament

**Mark 4:10:** *And when he was alone, those around him with the twelve asked him about the parables.*

The Gospels give evidence of Jesus personally exercising conference with his disciples. He is found to be conferring with his disciples and the rest of his hearers, "opening" or explaining many parables to them.

*You will find that most of the preaching recorded in the New Testament, was by conference, and frequently interlocutory, and that with one or two, fewer or more, as opportunity served. Thus Christ himself did most commonly preach.<sup>10</sup>*

—Richard Baxter (1515–1691)

**Luke 24:15, 32:** *While they were talking and discussing together, Jesus himself drew near and went with them . . . They said to each other, "Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the Scriptures?"*

Further support for conference is derived from Jesus' postresurrection appearance to the two disciples as they walked along the road to Emmaus and communed over the death and sufferings of Christ. This encounter served as evidence that by holy discourse Jesus drew near and accompanied them. Holy discourse brings Christ into our company, which in turn enables believers to resemble Christ more closely.

*While they communed together, Jesus himself drew near, and went with them. When men entertain bad discourse, Satan draws near, and he makes one of the company; but when they have holy and gracious conference, Jesus Christ draws near, and where-ever he comes, he brings a blessing along with him.<sup>11</sup>*

*We see the poore Disciples, when they were in a damp for the losse of Christ, after he comes, meets them, and*

*talks of holy things. In that very conference their hearts were warmed and kindled: For, next to Heaven it selfe our meeting together here, it is a kinde of Paradise, the greatest pleasure of the world is, to meet with those here, whom we shall ever live with in Heaven.<sup>12</sup>*

—Richard Sibbes (1577–1635)

**Romans 14:1:** *As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions.*

The mutual benefits of godly conference are to be the substitute for the divisiveness caused by the arguing and quarreling instigated by more mature believers with those younger in the faith.

*[Another means is] holy conference with our godly brethren; for hereby those which are falling are confirmed, and the wearie hands and weake knees strengthened, as Eliphaz speaketh, Job 43.4 And those who are weake in faith are comforted and established with the godly instructions, profitable exhortations and sweet consolations of those who are more strong. And therefore the Apostle Paul exhorts those who had attained unto a great measure of faith, that they admit such as were weake into their company to be made partakers of their Christian conferences, to the end that hereby they might be more and more strengthened and confirmed.<sup>13</sup>*

—John Downname (1571–1652)

**Colossians 3:16:** *Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God.*

Paul desired for the church to engage in conference. This is to be a community-building affair where the natural expression of the church's growth in the knowledge of Christ appears in the words believers speak to one another.

*[Paul] willeth them to conferre of the Scriptures, to the profit of one another, so he sheweth them how they shall come unto it.<sup>14</sup>*

—Nicholas Bownd

**Ephesians 4:29:** *Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear.*

Our speech to one another in godly consideration for the other will build both healthy and harmonious community and defeat Satan’s aim to cause discord from within.

*The Apostle bids us edifie one another, Ephes 4.29. And how more than this way? Good conference enlightens the mind when it is ignorant; warms it when it is frozen; settles it when it is wavering. A good life adorns Religion; good discourse propagates it.*<sup>15</sup>

–Thomas Watson

## How to Apply the Conference Concept

Key to the exercise of conference is the desire to know God’s Word better and to live out its truth. Well-formatted questions applied to a sermon message or biblical passage can further our understanding and application of Scripture. This may require advancing from questions with one-word answers to study questions that require deeper thought and discussion.

Here are a few typical questions the Puritans found useful in conference, redesigned for our contemporary understanding:

- What does God want you to know about him? About yourself?
- For what is the soul thankful?
- What are the words or actions that demonstrate your soul’s love for Christ?
- What is your soul afraid of God knowing?
- To what extent is your soul willing to go to preserve unity in your community?

Consider asking these types of questions and, more important, answering them with an attentiveness to your own heart and the hearts of others. Be ready to experience a greater commitment to digging deeper in your life together in Christian community. In good company and conference, the goodness of God and the struggles of life meet in loving acceptance and godly direction. This centuries-old practice, whose roots are found in Scripture, will foster community for those who long to keep themselves and others within the compass of God’s Word by their conversations whether they be audible, in print, or even on a social networking site.

## Notes

1. John Preston, *Saints Spirituall Strength in Remaines of That Reverend and Learned Divine John Preston* (London: Printed by Richard Badger, 1637), pp. 113–14.
2. John Bunyan, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* (1666; repr. Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Christian Classics, 2007), ¶ 37.
3. Bunyan, *Grace Abounding*, ¶ 38.
4. Jonathan Michel, *A Discourse of the Glory to Which God Hath Called Believers by Jesus Christ* (London: Printed for Nathaniel Ponder, 1677), pp. 1–2.
5. Thomas Watson, *Heaven Taken by Storm* (London: Printed by R.W., 1670), p. 71.
6. Thomas Watson, *Religion Our True Interest* (London: Printed by J. Astwood, 1682), p. 91.
7. Nicholas Bownd, *Sabbathum Veteris et Noui Testament* (London: Printed by Felix Kyngston, 1606), p. 394.
8. Richard Greenham, *Workes* (London: Printed by Felix Kingston, 1605), p. 227.
9. Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry’s Commentary on the Whole Bible* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1991), 4:1181–82.
10. Richard Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor*, ed. William Brown (Carlisle, Pa.: Banner of Truth Trust, 2001), p. 228.
11. Watson, *Heaven Taken by Storm*, p. 74.
12. Richard Sibbes, *Bowels Opened* (London: Printed by R. Cotes, 1648), p. 297.
13. John Downname, *The Christian Warfare* (London: Printed by William Standsby, 1634), p. 259.
14. Nicholas Bownd, *Sabbathum Veteris et Noui Testamenti* (London: By Felix Kyngston, 1606), p. 394.
15. Watson, *Heaven Taken by Storm*, p. 73.

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