

Family Culture And Conversations

A.P.E.S.T. In Action

If we reflect on the early church in the book of Acts and the account of the early church functioning in together as God's family, we notice that God orchestrated and organized his family on earth in a way that provided the best context for His gifts to equip and build up the family. We can see this example from afar as we study the book of Acts, but it is our desire that our church also be structured and function in such a way that the same "Biblical Family" culture flourishes among us. With this in mind, we aim to work together to most effectively provide 1) equipping opportunities to build up and 2) real-life contexts to exercise the APEST gifts as the family of God together.

It is important to note that with something as diverse as the family of God, we can never program or plan for how all spiritual gifts are used. In such a beautiful way, God works above our plans and manifests His gifting in people at any place and any time that He sees fit. In no way do we seek to plan HIM or HIS GIFTS, but we do want to work with Him to provide ministry contexts (Central Teaching, MC Gatherings, Personal Discipleship) in which His gifts can effectively function for the benefit of His family as He leads us into His Larger Story.

Each ministry context is designed for particular APEST gifts/impulses to be in operation within that context. These will be referred to as the **primary** APEST gifts for that context. The other APEST gifts will be referred to as the **secondary** gifts for that context. Here is how we see the primary and secondary gifts play out in a principled way in the various ministry contexts of Hope Community Church.

A Word On Gifting And Impulse

As we look specifically at the family of God functioning with and in the APEST gifts, it is important to remember that we are not communicating that a gifted "individual" must be present for the "impulse/function" of that gift to be present. Understanding the necessity of a given gift in a certain ministry context helps us to focus and strive to see its "impulse/function" be present even if a gifted person is not.

Central Teaching

In our Central Teachings, we desire that the communication of the Bible through the APEST gifts of **teacher** and **apostle** be the primary focus. We believe that this focus is Biblically based and supported in directive and exemplary forms in the New Testament. If we are to lead the church into maturity, then we must maintain this conviction of having formal, corporate communication of Biblical truth for the family of

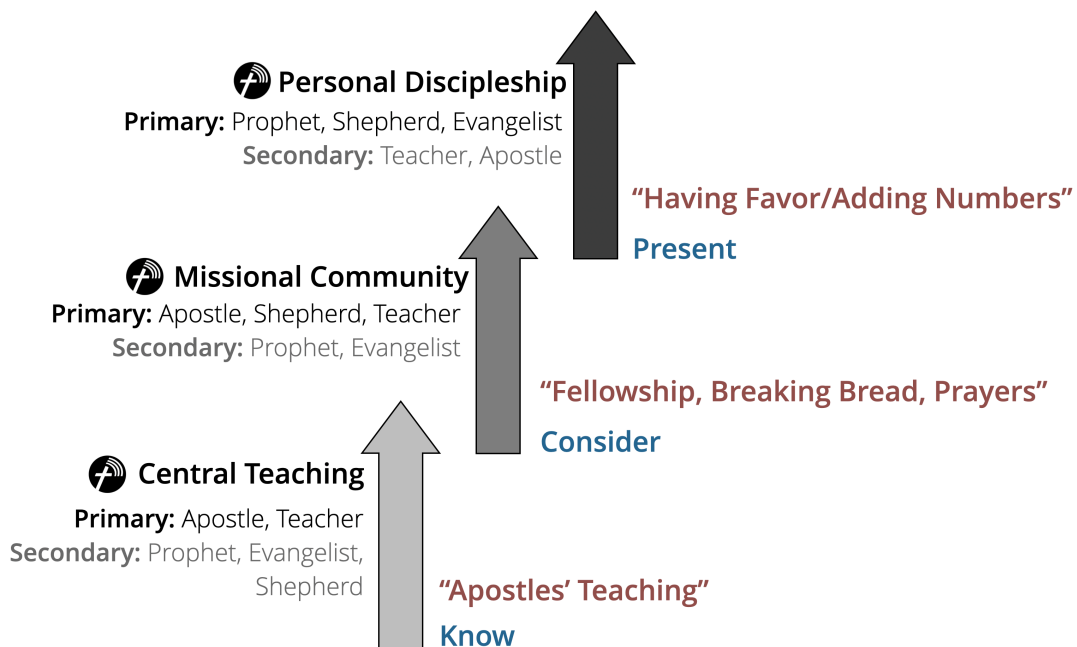
God. Having said this, we also acknowledge and encourage the manifestation of the various impromptu, personal, and organic secondary APEST gifts of **evangelist**, **prophet**, and **shepherd** that certainly take place in corporate gatherings of the family of God.

Missional Community

In our Missional Community gatherings (of the more formal and whole group kind), we desire that the personal understanding and consideration of the Bible that has been taught at the Central Teaching be a primary focus. This is most commonly and effectively fostered through the **shepherd** and **teacher** gifts. We also realize that the nature and function of a Missional Community is one that desperately needs practical, family-level vision and direction; that is most commonly demonstrated through the **apostle** gift. Due to this realization, we see these three gifts as the primary gifts that are demonstrated and necessary in the normal rhythm of Missional Community group gatherings. Having said this, we also acknowledge and encourage the manifestation of the various impromptu, personal, and organic secondary APEST gifts of **prophet** and **evangelist** that certainly take place in corporate gatherings of the family of God.

Personal Discipleship

For holistic family life in God’s family to take hold and reshape our lives into the image of our Father, we must continually move from the corporate and press into the personal. No greater model of this exists than Jesus Himself. This is most commonly and effectively fostered through the **shepherd**, **prophet** and **evangelist** gifts. These are the primary APEST gifts used in personal relationships as we seek to help each other move into real-life living in the family of God. We also realize that personal relationships require periods of other investment as well through the **apostle** and **teacher** gifts.



Meaningful Conversation And Lifestyle

Romans 8:1-8

As we desire to move ourselves and others into meaningful life in the family of God and do the “root work” that is required of us, we must embrace our most powerful tool in this task, which is **conversation**. At first mention, conversation seems like such a simplistic thing, almost to the extent that we disagree with the initial claim. This is primarily due to the fact that our past experiences with conversations have been shallow discussions about temporary things, and we do not believe that conversations can create a change in lifestyle. We must face these challenges from a Biblical perspective if we are to move forward.

The Bible emphasizes the foundation of spiritual life and growth around “thinking.” Romans 8:1-7 provides us with a primer on the importance of this thinking, summarized most succinctly in verse 5 where Paul writes, “those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit.” This “setting our minds” is the mental process whereby we deeply consider biblical truth and begin to allow it to replace lies that we have been entrusting ourselves to in the past. When you think about it in those terms, it is clear to see that the foundation of all change is the mind, and therefore, we must conclude that the only way to engage each other’s minds is through conversation.

As we press into having more meaningful conversations, we must acknowledge the two practical things that cause us the most difficulty: 1) **transitioning conversations** from casual to productive, and 2) the **internal and external roadblocks** to meaningful conversations.

Leveraging Conversations

This issue of transitioning conversations is likely the single most widely expressed practical challenge that disciplinemakers face. Many, if not most, have the desire to engage in meaningful conversations unto life change, but all struggle with how to make those happen. Here are a few principles and practices that might help.

- **Different types of conversations.** It helpful to note that there is a process of moving a conversation to something meaningful, and that each step of that process is positive.

Most conversations begin at the ¹**casual** level. Weather, sports, kids, and work all provide easy and less intrusive content for discussion. These are non-threatening conversations that are easy to join. Casual social conversations are led by casual questions. When we keep the discussion and the questions that we ask of others, on the casual level, so too goes the conversation.

We do want to move those casual conversations to more ²**intentional** areas. Intentional conversations are stepping into deeper Biblical topics that have been taught. The aim of these intentional conversations is to press into how the biblical truth intersects with a person’s thinking, not necessarily into their lifestyle choices. Intentional conversations happen with intentional questions. These types of questions are not necessarily aimed at life change per se, but they focus heavily on our thinking, specifically related to what we see the Bible teaching. Challenging questions that are aimed at discussing the inconsistencies of our thinking with the Bible are very helpful. When we move conversations into intentional areas, we are gaining ideas on what people KNOW related to the truth that was taught and helping them CONSIDER that truth at deeper levels.

It is our aim, though, to get to more ³**productive** conversations. These conversations are more personal in nature, more transparent in quality, and more focused in terms of outcome. It is more difficult and time consuming to get to these types of conversations, but they are the ones that most frequently lead to life change. Productive conversations can become very effective as we ask good questions. We are looking to talk more openly about personal struggles with thinking and acting in ways consistent with what the Bible teaches us. So, we need to boldly move into those types of questions. As we do this, there is wisdom in moving slowly, allowing room for our friend to process and consider, and also to share our own challenges with the Biblical truths that we are learning. The desired outcome of this type of conversation is for the person to PRESENT themselves to God and their members to His righteousness through the process of repentance.

- **Different environments lead to different conversations.** As we consider the various types of conversations, it is important that we remember that all conversations are good. We must also hold a priority for moving conversations into more meaningful areas. One of the greatest factors for moving conversations into more meaningful areas is the environment. Casual conversations most normally take place in larger groups (Central Teaching). People are more reluctant to share deeper information when in the presence of other people, especially those with whom they are not acquainted. Intentional conversations tend to occur in smaller groups of people who have shared relationships (Missional Community gathering). People are more likely to open up about ideas that contradict their own if they are in the company of those that they know. Productive conversations that lead to life change are almost always experienced in small groups of 2-3 people (Personal Discipleship). These environments provide the best opportunity for personal transparency and sharing at levels that can lead to life change.

With these principles in mind, it is important to set appropriate expectations for each “environment” in which you find yourself. If the gathering is larger, consider the types of questions to ask and also the types of responses that you will receive from the person that you talking with. For example, if you are in an MC gathering and are asking questions that are pressing deeply into an individual’s thinking and lifestyle, don’t be surprised if they aren’t too open in their sharing. On the other hand, if you are having a one-on-one conversation over coffee and you ask a deep question, don’t be surprised when they are willing to engage. Environments matter.

- **Using personal testimony as a bridge.** One of the most simple ways to transition a conversation into the next level of depth (i.e. from intentional to productive) is to lead into it through personal testimony. Authentic personal transparency is a powerful way to help others step into the deeper conversation themselves. Most people will not open up to deep personal reflection on their own; they need encouraged into it, and hearing someone else share personal struggles and humility under the Bible is a powerful motivator.

Personal testimony also has a unique way of lowering another person’s guard. It is much easier to share of your own struggles and thoughts when the person that you are talking to is open about their own issues. It helps to deflate a sense of personal pride and saving face and brings in a transparency and comfort level for sharing that is so necessary for life change to occur.

On a practical level, personal testimony is the easiest way to move a conversation because it is doesn’t abruptly require someone else to shift mental focus and move into deeper and more personal conversation. Many times the desire to move a conversation to a more serious topic is high, but the practicality of how to do it feels out of reach. Starting that shift by sharing your own

testimony is many times easier to do than to expect someone else to do it after you have abruptly put them on the spot with a deeper-level question.

Lastly, it is very important that the use of personal testimony not be a “tactic” to get others to talk. It must be authentic. It must be Spirit-led. And it must be motivated by a humble posture of our own deep need to consider the truths of the Bible for ourselves.

Internal And External Roadblocks

If we are honest with ourselves, we must acknowledge that a significant, if not proportionately greater, cause for our conversational challenges comes from within ourselves. Our own internal world is often overlooked as we struggle to delve deeper into conversations that matter with people. Consider these internal roadblocks, and consider how you have personally experienced them.

- **Expectations.** As human beings who are fleshly by nature, we approach all situations with expectations of how we can best benefit. This is no different with relationships. We all come to relationships and conversations with expectations of how we can best benefit from the encounter. Often as leaders of groups of people, we fail to appropriately plan and prepare ourselves for the “environments” and the conversations that we will have in them. We often come into relational environments (i.e. MC gathering) with expectations of how others should engage in conversation, share their struggles, or even be willing to pray. These expectations can deeply impact how we view others when they do not meet them. We must prayerfully and openly enter into our relationships and conversations with a humble attitude, valuing each individual as the unique person that they are, living in the unique circumstances that they are in.
- **Fear.** Many times our conversational depth is never advanced because of our own internal fears. We struggle with asking questions or pressing deeper because of the potential negative repercussions on ourselves. We fear awkward silence, tension, reaction, or even relational loss. Sadly, most people yearn for deeper discussions of meaning, but they struggle with going there themselves. They are open, many times, to go deeper, but our own personal fears as leaders limit us in trying. It is key that we remind ourselves and each other that negative reactions to relationship and conversation can be bridges to exposing needs and helping others move forward.
- **Pride.** We have serious problems with our pride, and that struggle certainly comes in to play in our relationships and conversations. We are often directed in our conversations by our pride. We can tend to react to certain comments, become offended at another person’s disinterest, or control conversations with desires to lift ourselves up. We must be praying constantly, in the moment, for clarity of mind to pursue conversations for the benefit of others and not ourselves. We must not desire relational “success” so that we can feel good about ourselves as leaders.

The people with whom we are attempting to have meaningful conversations are also a major source of challenge for us in this process. Many of us do not naturally press into relationships through deep intentional conversation. This is especially hard when faced with challenging people.

- **Bad listeners/over-talkers.** Some people struggle with conversation dominance. They interrupt, talk over you, and seemingly never listen to the point of consideration. These people can be reached and can be helped, it just takes additional patience and persistence. At times, it is helpful to have the difficult conversation with this type of person and share with them the challenges of helping them when they interrupt and do not listen. It might be hard, but the initial conversation

of challenging them in this negative pattern can provide a practical help as you talk with them. Also, consider planning ahead about some of the issues that you want to discuss with them in the Bible, and write out simple and succinct points that you want to share. Practice how you can “get to the point” quicker in your conversation. This might help you in your short windows of conversational opportunity.

- **Nervous/uncomfortable people.** Some people just have difficulty in conversation. They can be awkward and unable to engage in anything other than answering questions in the most simple of ways. It is helpful to note that many of these folks struggle in these areas because of their negative past experiences with relationships. These wounds can be deep and old, and so, often they are unable to pinpoint the impact of these wounds in their own lives. These types of relationships can be fostered and grow over time; they simply need a lot of patience and faithfulness. Do not set expectations for this type of person, but walk slowly with them, enjoying and valuing every conversation, even if it only moves things forward a little bit. Remember to encourage them a lot and spend a lot of time together having fun; these are important building blocks for them to begin to slowly open up to you.
- **Distracted people.** In our present culture, one of the most challenge personality traits in conversations is distraction. Technology and social media have created an endless avenue of distraction and many people struggle greatly with this. Patience is key, but honesty is also necessary in these types of relationships. As we grow a bit closer in the relationships, we can begin to point out the challenges that distraction can bring and offer to help them with this area of life. Some points in the relationship might even call for implementing guidelines to assist in the distractions and provide meaningful environments for conversations that matter.

Moving From Conversation Into Lifestyle

Becoming more capable in leading life into meaningful conversations is certainly a challenge, if not a struggle for some of us. We cannot, however, lose heart or give up on the need to grow in leading others into these types of conversations around Biblical truth. A life of fruitful investment in others’ lives through deep conversation about life in God’s Word is ours for the taking! That being said, we still must acknowledge that a conversation alone is not sufficient for life change. Necessary? Yes. Completely sufficient? No. There are other extremely necessary components of discipleship that must be employed if life change is to take place.

- **Intercessory Prayer.** As you walk down the road of discipling someone into a new life of living truth in the root issues of life, you must be committed to humbly approach God for His wisdom and grace for your disciple and for yourself. You are entering in challenging relational territory and you will need God’s direction on the journey ahead. Never lose sight of your need for Him.
- **Continued conversation.** One conversation alone will never change a person. It’s often best to think of conversations in “rounds,” like a boxing match. It takes many rounds, many punches, jab after jab after jab, hook after hook, to bring about an ultimate victory. In a similar pattern, meaningful conversations must layer one after another, touching on the same topic (especially if it addresses root-level issues) over and over again, if we are to ultimately see life change take place.
- **Deepening a relationship of trust and consistency.** There is no way to have these types of repetitive conversations about root-level issues in life without a deepening relationship of trust. This is only built by sacrificing time invested in other things for time together. Some of this time is

spent in casual, fun things and other time is invested in intentional conversations and “walking through life” with them as biblical truth intersects with the circumstances of their life.

- **Bold accountability.** New fundamental ways of thinking, that God’s Word teaches us, always leads us to consider new ways of living as well. Our discipleship must guide others into considering and implementing new ways to respond to life. As you continue, then, to have meaningful, repetitive conversations about these root-level issues in each other’s lives, it is vital that you consider, plan, and implement ways of holding each other accountable to the new ways of **thinking** and action that God’s Word is teaching you. Regular text conversations, phone calls, and early morning coffees must have a regular dose of revisiting the truths that are being learned and how they are being lived out.

Life also brings unplanned “opportunities” to walk in these new patterns of life. It is important to help others as they engage those circumstances. We must help them know how to think and act differently in difficult circumstances. When they fail and fall back on old patterns, a loving and gracious relationship leads us to carefully confront them and lead them back into the truth that they are learning.