



# Mentoring Conversations

30 key topics to explore together

**Tony Horsfall**

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*To the memory of my dear wife, Evelyn (1947–2020),  
who sacrificially gave herself to support me in my ministry,  
especially that of writing.  
Nothing I have achieved would have been possible without her.*

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# Introduction

I first became involved in mentoring some 20 years ago when mentoring was still a fairly new concept in most churches. Since then the effectiveness of working one-to-one with others for their spiritual growth has become accepted as part of the ministry philosophy of many churches and organisations. Now a variety of training courses exist to equip people for a ministry of mentoring, many offering recognised qualifications.

All this is very exciting, but it has left me wondering how those who have been trained as mentors are progressing in their ministry. Are they finding it easy or difficult? Specifically, I wonder what resources they have to help them in their calling to make disciples.

I am also concerned for the many people who mentor others informally, without any specific training. They probably never use the term 'mentoring' themselves, but that is what they do as they quietly draw alongside others to help them in following Jesus. What resources do they have, I wonder?

I suspect that those mentors who are already experienced in life and ministry will have a good idea of what the Christian journey looks like and what are the key areas to cover in their times of conversation with those they are helping. Others, however, may not be so confident or well equipped. Their ministry of mentoring may never really get off the ground because they are less sure of which topics are important in a mentoring relationship. To meet this need I have written *Mentoring Conversations*, with the purpose of providing material around which a series of mentoring sessions might be based. For those meeting one to one or in a small group, here are 30 key topics to be explored in a mentoring setting that will help in producing mature disciples.

Conversation is at the heart of mentoring. Essentially it is about two or more people meeting together to talk about the journey of faith, usually with the more experienced person taking the lead (the mentor) and the other person or people keen to learn by sharing their questions and concerns (the mentoree). A mentor needs to be a good listener, skilled at asking the kind

of questions that lead to deeper sharing and able to make sense of what they are hearing. David Benner, in his book *Sacred Companions*, names the three key ingredients in mentoring as hospitality, presence and dialogue.<sup>1</sup>

*Hospitality* in this sense is welcoming others into our life with the offer of grace and love. It is making time for them and providing a safe space where they can feel accepted and where they are able to share freely their innermost longings and questions without fear of judgement or ridicule.

*Presence* means that we give them our full attention, being present to the other for the time we are together. We place our own concerns to one side so that we can listen well to what is shared. It also reminds us that our aim is to become more aware of God's presence as we meet together.

*Dialogue* is about heartfelt conversation and, as Benner says, 'Dialogue is one of the deepest forms of soul engagement we can experience with another person. It is a gift of inestimable value.'<sup>2</sup> Such conversations involve exploring thoughts and feelings and seeking God's insight for the way ahead. They do not have to be intense, but they are purposeful and hopefully lead to a sharing of one's innermost self.

This is the kind of conversation I have in mind, not merely chit-chat or even Bible study. I am talking about *holy* conversation, the sort of dialogue that includes vulnerable sharing and that leads to a deeper relationship with God and a transformation of life. This is surely at the heart of all discipleship and is the kind of interaction that is described in the book of Malachi: 'Then those who feared the Lord talked with each other, and the Lord listened and heard' (3:16).

Only after I had begun thinking along these lines did I come across the Puritan practice of 'conference'.<sup>3</sup> To confer is to talk with others about things that really matter, and for the Puritans this meant reflective conversation about God and the state of one's soul. Joanne Jung, in her book *The Lost Discipline of Conversation*, seeks to restore this forgotten practice to the church today. She writes, 'We can, in conversation, be as Christ to one another, or to another. God desires that our conversations reflect and ultimately direct us and others to Him.'<sup>4</sup>

At a time when there is so much social isolation and shallowness in relationships, such meaningful conversation is vital for our health and well-being



and our spiritual vitality. Jung goes on to say, ‘For optimal spiritual health, conversations on spiritual matters matter. They speak to our desire to know and be known by God and one another, and to do so in community.’<sup>5</sup>

For the English Puritans of the 16th and 17th centuries, ‘conference’ was a vitally important means of grace intended to promote spiritual transformation into the likeness of Christ, and it was as familiar to them as prayer or Bible meditation. They revered the Bible and gave high value to preaching, encouraging their followers to pay careful attention to what they heard by listening well, taking notes, repeating the sermon and conferring with others. In this way the word of God could take root in their hearts, resulting in a change of life. The practice of conference was the key to transformation, for it was in the context of honest sharing that the connection was made between biblical truth and life experience. Such conversations could take place over meals or when walking together, in formal ways or more spontaneously, but always the aim was the care of souls and the promotion of spiritual growth.

Perhaps God is reminding us of the importance of good conversation as a key factor in disciple-making and in our own transformation. The 30 topics included in this book have been chosen carefully to encourage such dialogue and provide substance for strategic conversations. As I have reflected on my own journey with God over more than 50 years, I have brought together under six headings some of the issues that have been central to my own spiritual formation. There is a progression to the chapters, but I am not offering here a curriculum for growth that must be slavishly followed. Spiritual growth is far more untidy than that and takes place gradually over a lifetime. Earlier chapters may be more suited to newer believers (although everyone can benefit from revisiting foundational truths), while later ones may be more appropriate for those who are more mature in the faith. You are welcome to choose which chapters to focus on and to leave others that seem less relevant at the moment. Think of *Mentoring Conversations* as a resource book to be dipped into as and when you need it. For this reason, you will find some minor overlapping in the chapters, since it is not expected that you will necessarily read them all.

## How to use this book

I see the book’s primary use as being in a one-to-one setting where both mentor and mentoree have a copy of the book. The mentor might suggest

reading a particular chapter for discussion before the meeting and then use the questions given as a starting point for conversation. Or it might be the other way round, with the mentoree saying, 'This is the topic that most interests me right now.' Again, having both read the relevant section, the questions can then be used as an aid to deeper dialogue. This is a process that may be repeated with other topics that are deemed relevant.

Equally, the book could be used by a small group (small enough so that deep conversation can happen), where a leader might facilitate the discussion using topics considered most relevant to the group. Each person will need their own copy of the book so they can prepare well beforehand and then come to the group session ready to share their thoughts and ask their questions.

It would also work well for a peer-mentoring group, perhaps comprised of colleagues or friends meeting every so often for a study morning, quiet day or retreat together. Each time they meet, a different person could choose the topic for reflection, discussion and prayer.

The normal pattern for using this material will be in conversation with other people. We do not grow spiritually in isolation, but in company with others. However, because of circumstances some may prefer to work through the book by themselves. This could apply, for example, to those in remote situations or working overseas. In such a scenario, you the reader would be the mentoree and I the author would be your mentor-at-a-distance. This is not ideal, but could still be useful.

Creative people are likely to find ways to use the material in ways that I have not thought of. Please do so! What I hope will happen is that the material within these pages will act as a catalyst for good conversation, leading to spiritual growth and transformation and the making of more mature disciples of Jesus. If that happens, I will be well satisfied.

# Foundations

# 1

## The call to follow

**After this, Jesus went out and saw a tax collector by the name of Levi sitting at his tax booth. ‘Follow me,’ Jesus said to him, and Levi got up, left everything and followed him.**

LUKE 5:27–28

Foundations are an essential part of any building work. To stand the test of time, a building must have sure foundations. The higher the building, the deeper the foundations.

Gordon MacDonald tells the story of the building of the famous Brooklyn Bridge in New York. The chief engineer was frustrated by public opinion that the work of construction was too slow. He reminded them that as much work was being undertaken underwater as above it and that, in fact, more masonry and concrete were used on the hidden foundations than on the part of the bridge that would be above the waterline. MacDonald comments:

The Brooklyn Bridge remains a major transportation artery in New York City today because more than 135 years ago the chief engineer and his construction team did their most patient and daring work where no-one could see it: on the foundations of the towers below the waterline.<sup>6</sup>

A mentoring relationship is a good place to examine the foundations on which we are building our life in Christ. This is not a backward step, because our spiritual foundations are crucial to our growth in God, and we do well to check them in case they need strengthening. No matter how long we have been believers, it is always prudent to make sure our foundations are firm and sure. As the apostle Paul said to the church at Corinth: ‘Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves’ (2 Corinthians 13:5).

At the heart of the Christian life is the call to discipleship, to be those who follow Jesus wholeheartedly, modelling our lives on his and seeking to do his

will as best we can. As he began his public ministry, Jesus carefully gathered around himself a group of men and women who wanted to do just that. His call to them was unequivocal: ‘Come, follow me,’ he said (Mark 1:17).

From the different gospel accounts we surmise that he met with them several times before they were ready to take such a bold step, but eventually they were decided. Simon, Andrew, James and John left their fishing nets (their livelihood) and followed him. Soon others joined the band of disciples – Philip and Nathanael (Bartholomew), Matthew (Levi), Thomas, James, Simon the Zealot, Thaddaeus and Judas Iscariot. They gave themselves to being with Jesus, to learning from his teaching and example and to sharing in his ministry.

The message of Jesus that they embraced with such enthusiasm was disarmingly simple, yet deeply challenging: ‘The time has come... The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!’ (Mark 1:15).

To *repent* is to turn away from sin and anything that is wrong in our lives. It involves a complete change of direction, a turning away from that which is unhelpful and a turning towards that which is good and right in God’s sight. This is indeed a radical change, and it is not to be passed over lightly. Repentance is often costly and involves sorrow over the sin in our lives. It is an ongoing attitude of heart that we maintain as we consistently choose to leave our sinful ways behind us and instead choose to follow the way of God.

To *believe* is to accept for ourselves the gospel message. Such belief is not simply an intellectual assent to faith statements (like the Apostles’ Creed) but a commitment of heart and life to actually live by the truth we have found in Jesus. It is to recognise Jesus as the Son of God and to receive by faith the grace and forgiveness he offers us through his sacrificial death. It is to trust him in all the circumstances of life.

Those who truly repent and sincerely believe bring themselves under the lordship of Christ and enter the realm of his kingdom. They gladly submit their will to his and make their aim in life to please him. Sadly, this foundational principle is often missing in much western Christianity. We have offered a gospel to people that centres on receiving salvation and forgiveness without any mention of the cost of being a disciple. At best this comes later, for the few who want to take it further, and the call to discipleship is often seen as an optional extra for the spiritual elite. Bill Hull calls this ‘non-discipleship

Christianity', seeing it as the major weakness of the contemporary church. He writes, 'We evangelicals accept and encourage a two-level Christian experience in which only serious Christians pursue and practise discipleship, while grace and forgiveness is enough for everyone else.'<sup>7</sup>

When Priscilla and Aquila met Apollos in Ephesus (Acts 18:24–28), they recognised him as a young man who was gifted and zealous for God, yet who needed help in understanding and expressing his faith more fully. With their heart for making disciples, they 'invited him to their home and explained to him the way of God more accurately' (v. 26). Here is a wonderful picture of the kind of mentoring relationship we have in mind, and it is the kind of relationship most believers need if they are to have good foundations and grow to maturity.

If we are to build a life in God that is strong enough to withstand the storms of life and vibrant enough to have a positive impact on others, it will be because this solid foundation of discipleship has been laid in our hearts. Only when we take discipleship seriously for ourselves will we have the authority to make other disciples.

I took my first steps as a disciple of Christ as a 14-year-old, when I responded to an invitation to receive God's free gift of salvation during a service in the tiny Methodist chapel in the village where I grew up. Almost immediately I had a sense that God had a purpose for my life, but I floundered at first as a believer because there was no one to show me the way. Fortunately a new teacher with a strong faith came to the school I attended and began to disciple a small group of us who were believers (he may not have used that term in those days). Through his careful nurturing – and that of my youth group leader – I grew stronger in my faith until I began to sense the call to train for ministry, whatever that might involve.

I am so grateful that those who mentored me back then made clear the claims of Christ: 'Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me' (Mark 8:34). It was not easy, as there were issues in my life that needed sorting out. But as I increasingly submitted to the claims of Christ, I began to grow stronger in faith and clearer in my life's direction. This good foundation has served me well over the years when other challenges have come my way. I may waver from time to time, but in my heart of hearts I know I am a disciple of Jesus, and my choice is to do his will.

## Conversation starters

- 1 How would you describe your spiritual foundations? How did you come to faith, and what was your early experience of following Christ?
- 2 What part has repentance played in your relationship with God? What would you say are the main things you believe?
- 3 Would you say that 'being a disciple of Jesus' is fundamental to the way you understand yourself? If so, how does it influence the way you live and the choices you make?
- 4 Can you share an example of costly obedience as you have sought to follow Christ?
- 5 What challenges do you currently face as you seek to be a disciple of Jesus?

## Helpful reading

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (Macmillan, 1937)

Bill Hull, *The Complete Book of Discipleship: On being and making followers of Christ* (NavPress, 2006)

Peter Morden, *The Message of Discipleship: Authentic followers of Jesus in today's world* (IVP, 2019)

David Watson, *Discipleship* (Hodder and Stoughton, 1983)

Dallas Willard, *The Great Omission: Reclaiming Jesus's essential teachings on discipleship* (Monarch, 2006)

## 2

# The power of the new birth

**Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God – children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband’s will, but born of God.**

JOHN 1:12-13

Chuck Colson was a leading figure in the White House administration of President Nixon from 1969 to 1973. Known as the ‘hatchet man’, he was both ruthless and cunning as he sought to weaken the president’s enemies. He was involved in the infamous Watergate scandal and was imprisoned for his part in the affair.

When Colson was facing arrest and becoming increasingly conscious of his wrongdoing, a friend gave him a copy of *Mere Christianity* by C.S. Lewis. The book changed his life. He experienced a genuine conversion which sparked a radical change in his life. After his release, he wrote his memoirs in a book entitled *Born Again* and went on to found Prison Fellowship International, a ministry dedicated to supporting prisoners and their families. Colson wrote:

The real story was that Christ had reached down to me, even in my disgrace and shame, and revealed Himself as the one who forgives and makes new. *Born Again* is the story of a broken man transformed by the love and power of Jesus Christ – who continues to transform me every passing day.<sup>8</sup>

Colson experienced what the Bible calls the new birth, and although his story of conversion is more dramatic than most, all of us who turn in repentance and faith to Christ experience the same transforming spiritual dynamic at work in our hearts. Indeed, such an experience of being born again (or more accurately ‘born from above’, since the initiative is with God) is a key foundation in the spiritual life.



Jesus made this absolutely clear to Nicodemus, a respected religious leader and spiritual seeker, who came to him secretly one night. ‘Very truly I tell you,’ Jesus said, ‘no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again’ (John 3:3). He went on to say (v. 5) that we cannot enter the kingdom of God without experiencing both physical birth (born of water) and spiritual birth (born of the Spirit). The experience of new birth is essential if we are to understand and grasp the spiritual dimension to life.

This experience of being born again is also called regeneration, and it is the result of the mysterious work of the Spirit by which the seeds of new life (God’s own divine life) are implanted within us. It is a miracle that God works in all those who turn sincerely to him in repentance and faith, and it imparts to us the power to change and to live a new life. Colson did not simply turn over a new leaf; the change in him was not a case of self-reformation. Such a transformation could only be brought about by the direct action of the Spirit of God, and it is the same Spirit who is at work in every believer.

The apostle Paul experienced such a turnaround in his own life. The man who persecuted the church, who described himself as the foremost of sinners, a blasphemer and a violent man, was turned upside down by the grace and mercy of God (1 Timothy 1:12–14). After his encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus, he became a preacher of the faith, boldly carrying the gospel message throughout the Mediterranean world and being willing to suffer much in the process. He described the startling change that the new birth makes in these inspiring words: ‘If anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: the old has gone, the new is here!’ (2 Corinthians 5:17).

Furthermore, he saw it as being like a personal resurrection for those who had once been dead in their trespasses and sins. He said:

But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions – it is by grace you have been saved.

EPHESIANS 2:4–5

Those of us for whom conversion was less dramatic and more gradual may underestimate what has actually happened to us, but as we turned to Christ the same seed of divine life was planted in us. Perhaps we need to pause from time to time to remind ourselves of this staggering truth: the life of God is now at work in us, giving us the power to change and to be transformed.

The apostle Peter had also known the transforming work of God in his life, and in his first epistle – most likely written to encourage newly baptised believers – reminds his readers of this same reality: ‘You have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God’ (1 Peter 1:23). Here is the same picture of the seed of God having been sown into our hearts, hopefully to find fertile ground. Not only does this change us in the initial sense of turning away from our old way of life, but it also makes possible the growth of the new life within us, of Christlikeness and moral transformation.

With this in mind, Peter can exhort his readers to ‘grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ’ (2 Peter 3:18). Such an encouragement would be futile were it not for the fact that we are able to change and to grow because of the life that is within us. This transformation never comes about by merely trying harder or living by rules and regulations. It is made possible by nurturing the seed of divine life within us.

My wife is a keen gardener, and she loves plants. In particular she likes to grow things from seed. She can often be found pottering in the greenhouse, sowing her seeds in little plastic trays and plant pots, making sure they have the right conditions in which to grow and thrive. Carefully over the weeks she nurtures and tends them as they begin to sprout and grow, transplanting them when necessary, watering and feeding them as required. Patiently she cooperates with the power of nature, taking great delight in the whole process, until finally she can see the results – beautiful flowers, healthy vegetables, rosy-red tomatoes.

If a person can take such care over plants, surely we can take care over our souls? As we learn to work in harmony with the new life within us and to live in keeping with the ways of the Spirit of God, we will be changed and transformed from within. As Paul reminds the Galatians, we reap what we sow: ‘The one who plants in response to God, letting God’s Spirit do the growth work in him, harvests a crop of real, eternal life’ (Galatians 6:8, MSG).

## Conversation starters

- 1 Have you experienced the new birth? How did it come about, and how has it changed your life?
- 2 Why is the new birth essential to our spiritual growth and development as disciples?
- 3 What do you learn from the picture of the life of God being like a seed sown in your heart?
- 4 Why do you think trying harder to live like a Christian is futile? What is a better alternative?
- 5 How are you nurturing the life of God within you?

## Helpful reading

James M. Boice, *Amazing Grace* (Tyndale House, 1993)

Dan Clark, *I'm a Christian, Aren't I?* (IVP, 2010)

Billy Graham, *How to be Born Again* (Word Publishing, 1977)

David Pawson, *The Normal Christian Birth: How to give new believers a proper start in life* (Hodder and Stoughton, 1989)

## Notes

- 1 David G. Benner, *Sacred Companions: The gift of spiritual friendship and direction* (IVP, 2002), ch. 2.
- 2 Benner, *Sacred Companions*, p. 54.
- 3 The Puritans were members of a religious reform movement known as Puritanism that arose within the Church of England in the late 16th century. They believed the Church of England was too similar to the Roman Catholic Church and should eliminate ceremonies and practices not rooted in the Bible. They were known for their spirituality and godly way of life.
- 4 Joanne J. Jung, *The Lost Discipline of Conversation: Surprising lessons in spiritual formation drawn from the English Puritans* (Zondervan, 2018), p. 17.
- 5 Jung, *The Lost Discipline of Conversation*, p. 18.
- 6 Gordon MacDonald, *Building below the Waterline: Shoring up the foundations of leadership* (Hendrickson, 2011), p. 1.
- 7 Bill Hull, *The Complete Book of Discipleship: On being and making followers of Christ* (NavPress, 2006), p. 16.
- 8 Charles W. Colson, *Born Again* (Chosen Books, 2008), p. 10.



*Enabling all ages to grow in faith*



Anna Chaplaincy  
Living Faith  
Messy Church  
Parenting for Faith

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The Bible Reading Fellowship (BRF) is a Christian charity that resources individuals and churches. Our vision is to enable people of all ages to grow in faith and understanding of the Bible and to see more people equipped to exercise their gifts in leadership and ministry.

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A core resource for anyone involved in spiritual mentoring, this book provides a basis for conversations in a mentoring context through 30 short chapters structured around six key topics:

- Foundations
- Steps to growth
- Living out your faith
- Going deeper
- Staying strong
- Living with mystery



Each chapter begins with a Bible passage or text, followed by the author's comment on the topic, questions to use as starting points for conversation and suggestions for further reading.

‘Tony Horsfall is recognised and respected as an elder statesman in the area of mentoring, and this book is a gift to those of us who have been inspired and encouraged by him.’

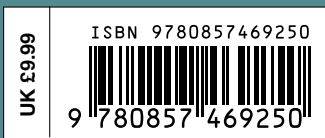
**Paul Wilcox, The Christian Coach and Mentor Network,**  
*author of **Intentional Mentoring***

‘Another gem of a book from Tony. I will definitely be using it with all of my mentees.’

**Sharon Prior, senior lecturer, Moorlands College**



Tony Horsfall is a well-respected author and retreat leader with a lifetime's experience in mentoring others, including church leaders and missionaries, in Britain as well as overseas. His book *Mentoring for Spiritual Growth* has helped many to understand the importance of mentoring in today's church and to take their first steps in mentoring others. For the last ten years he has convened an annual Spiritual Mentoring Forum for those wishing to develop their interest in this vital area of disciple-making.



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