

Passion Talks: Stanford Model

Wendy Quay Honeycutt

Passion Talks are the brainchild of Christian graduate students who gather together each year at our Bay Area Winter Conference. They asked themselves the question, “What is it that we as Christians who are experts in our respective fields, bring to the church and to the world?” Frustrated with church events that demanded they leave their intellectual lives at home, and professional and academic conferences that demanded they leave their faith at home, they came up with the idea of a conference where they could bring their Christian faith into the academic picture. Passion Talks are short “TED talk” style talks delivered by Christian graduate students, faculty members and professionals about an aspect of their work, expressly from a Christian perspective.

The first Passion Talks conference was held at Stanford in August 2013. Sixteen speakers shared their perspectives, and some 50-60 people attended overall. A year later at Passion Talks 2014, we had 20 speakers from Stanford, UC Berkeley, and UC Santa Cruz and 80 registrants attended. At Passion Talks 2015, faculty from UC Davis and Sacramento State joined us as speakers to bring us to a total of 24 speakers (including two plenary speakers) and about 110 registrants attended. PT topics over the years have included natural theology, developmental psychology, practices in teaching, technology and society, health, environmental science and biological determinism. Podcasts of the 2015 program are at <http://pt15.passiontalks.org/>

Some of the things we’ve seen happen at our PT conferences, as well as in our times of preparation include –

- Finding a space where we could fulfill our unique calling as Christian academics – for many of us, Passion Talks was a space where we could do something unique – we could specifically apply our expertise to explore big questions within our fields about the existence of God. Grad students were able to speak on God and Mathematics (Will Johnson, 2014), Impossibility Theory in computer science (Elliott Slaughter, 2014) and Biological Determinism (Ben Bell, 2015). These speakers found that they were able to do what very few others in the Church can do. They could use the concepts and language from within their fields to speak to their colleagues about the things of God. For these speakers, they found their unique place in the body of Christ.
- We articulated the unique things that knowing Christ brings to our motivation for our work, and to the way in which we do our work – Examples of these talks are Jerome Fang’s talk on how he teaches his classes (2014), George Korir’s talk on his research in delivering diagnostics to impoverished communities (2014) and Steve Lee’s talk on failing to get tenure and finding his calling (2015). Still others shared how God has sustained them through the challenges of a life in research (Kassahun Betre, 2013).
- Our community life as Bay Area academics deepened – The grad students of the Bay Area have always gathered annually at our Winter Conference. At Passion Talks we’ve found that through giving and listening to each other’s talks, we’re developing a deeper intimacy with each other as we learn about what we all work on, and as we hear each other’s motivations and theological musings. We’re seeing the power of learning from people in disciplines that are outside of our own, and of empathizing with each other’s struggles, and rejoicing in each other’s successes. Passion Talks is also giving birth to new networks of students across campuses. Each year,

students from different campuses connect with each other when they discover that they research in complementary areas.

- We experienced together the joy of feeling God’s pleasure – For all of us, as we spoke and shared our discoveries and our stories, we experienced the joy of worshipping God with this part of our lives that takes up so much of our time, but is so often stripped of spiritual value. For me, as I listened to talks, watched the logistics team put on meals and run registration, and delivered my own talk, I saw in some small way (or perhaps a not so small way) the truth of “Thy kingdom come” in our lives of study and research. It was a joyous experience, and one that I’m sure gave glory to God.

Don’t be distracted by the format of the conference! Passion Talks are simple to do in InterVarsity grad or faculty chapters or other groups – Stanford does them in large group each year – and they’re a great way to challenge students, faculty and staff alike to think through in detail and then articulate how our faith and work inform and intersect with each other. We’ve also found that when students give talks, it’s easy for them to invite their non-Christian friends to come listen. So give them a try!

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Participants: US InterVarsity Graduate and Faculty Ministry Staff

Place: Mundelein, Illinois

Language: English