

The Biography of Passion Talks in Northern California

Wendy Quay Honeycutt

At Stanford, the members of the Grad-fellowship identified a dilemma they were facing in their work and faith contexts. When they were doing their work and research at the university they had to speak like they were not Christians. When they were in church they had to speak like they were not academics. They wanted a conference where they could be both. They wanted a conference where they could truly be themselves and speak about both their work & research and their faith.

So when I came on staff, I met with Sherol Chen and she was trying to articulate these concerns. As we talked, she was having some difficulties articulating exactly what they were. But I am sitting there and I am thinking, 'I think I know what she is getting at' and I said, "let's just try it." And she said, "oh really? Yea, ok."

So at the next Bay Area Winter Conference, that was my first one, during the afternoon time, 5 grad-students gave the first passion talks. There weren't too many rules around it at the time. The first thing they said was that they kind of wanted to follow the TED talk idea, i.e. 15 minutes. So they had to be short. Actually, as I had been working with the grad-students, I learned that 15 minutes if you are in the STEM disciplines and you go to a conference that is all you get. So this is very familiar to them. It had to be 15 minutes and something about your work or your research and how your faith informs or meshes with that.

After those first 5 talks a couple of the students ... some of you may have met Kassa Betre an Ethiopian alum who came to Mundelein last year, he volunteered with me last year ... Sheroland Kassa basically said, "let's do a conference in the summer." They then spearheaded the conference.

So our first *Passion Talks Conference* happened that summer. Stanford, Berkeley, and UC Santa Cruz students came. It was mostly Stanford students because we were the biggest fellowship. It was pretty simple really. We just booked a room in the graduate community center on campus, I bought breakfast, we got Chipotles for lunch. I think (I am going to get the numbers wrong) we had ten or twelve talks. I gave a talk, I always do a passion talk as well. It was really interesting to see Sherol and Kassa get this thing going because they are like: 'Well, speakers have to submit abstracts.' I am like, well ok. And we got a very variable range of abstracts. It was the first conference, so we kind of let everybody in. That was interesting, they have now learned to say no to people since then.

So people were submitting abstracts. Interestingly, I think our first abstract came from Nathan Matias over at MIT, he is Hannah Eagleson's husband. It was super exciting for us because our first abstract came from an MIT student and we are over on the West Coast. It turns out he was doing some research in Seattle at the time, so he and Hannah were able to come down. He actually gave the first talk at our first conference.

So God kind of grabbed my attention to realize that this could be attractive to people. I don't think I appreciated quite how good an idea that it was or that it would capture people's attention in the way that it has.

From the beginning, all the speakers actually turned up with quite polished PowerPoint presentations. The quality of the theological and the work integration was pretty variable. But it was a start. We are working on quality control. It was really interesting to see the types of topics that people were talking about. Even after three conferences that we have done now, we seem to have three different types that is they seem to be falling into three categories of talks.

Talk Type #1 - *How our faith motivates our research or gives us meaning*

The first one tends to answer the question: How does my faith motivate my research or give meaning to my research? And so a really fun early passion talk was done by one of my students, Tammy. She does electrical engineering and she works on cell-phone signaling technology. Her first passion talk was about how she did an internship in China, made good friends actually with a few people in China, who were not students. One was her cleaning lady and her cleaning lady was poor, but she had a cell-phone. And so the technology that Tammy works on enables her to continue to have a relationship with her friend way over in China. So she explained how cell-phone technology connects people and how she sees God working through that. So her faith motivates her research.

I guess another example, George, who is I think Nigerian, does bio-technology. He developed a low-cost diagnostic tool that is based on the model of a music-box. And actually the World Health Organization (WHO) has picked up on his invention and they are developing that. His passion talk was basically explaining his music-box diagnostic tool but one of the key components was how all his work is motivated by his Christian faith.

Talk Type #2 - *Professional Testimonies*

The second category of talks that seemed to emerge is what we call *professional testimonies*. We found students wanting to share about their grad-school and research experience. Particularly the challenges of that and how it challenged their faith. And/or how their faith helped them get through those challenges. We had some really compelling and honest stories about individuals' faith-journeys through doing PhD. programs. So actually Kassa's first passion talk was a professional testimony on how his faith was deeply challenged by his struggles in research and how he has come through the other end.

Talk Type #3 - *Technical Talks*

The third category of talks, I guess I will call the technical talks, where someone is directly relating theology to the technical aspects of their research. So Kimmy Wu, actually Kassa's wife, she is an astro-

physicist, she works on cosmic microwave background research, so she works on the Big Bang. Her passion talk is on the Big Bang and Genesis one. It is direct science and faith.

One of our Berkeley students did what I am told was an amazing talk on math and how the Christian framework makes math possible. I don't understand it, but they told me it was really cool. Really only a mathematician could do a talk like that and be able to communicate to mathematicians in their language. so that was exciting.

Then one of our computer science students, Elliot, who chaired the last passion talk conference did his talk on computability theory. Apparently, in computer science, there is this question: How far can we go in our programming? What are the limits to our programming? And it is called computability theory. He talked about how he is kind of seeing truths about God, who is God, who we are, what are our limits through computability theory.

So these are clearly more the technical type of talks.

I share those categories, but I think it is one thing that has been really interesting to me to see, especially on the IFES email list-serve and even how some of our students as they were calling together the second and third conferences. People keep wanting to define them. People keep wanting to say: *What is a good passion talk? What is a bad passion talk? What are the characteristics of a good passion talk?* For me, I think one thing that I have learned in our journey is **let them evolve**. I think it would be really interesting to see if there are more kinds of passion talks that could come out because the limits are really the limits of the speakers. Right? And their experiences and what God is doing in their lives. So I am kind of an advocate for being a bit more organic about their development. So I say that because when you are wanting to encourage your students to try them, I am like let them try them. See what happens.

Thoughts after that first conference

That first conference was really an exciting experience because it was simple to put on. The grad-students found it wonderful to regather actually. It gave us a second area get together. What was super exciting was we were really surprised at how much we enjoyed listening to the research, hearing about the research that our friends were doing. A lot of us didn't know, and we have been talking about this conference, how we ever find out that. We don't ask each other in detail: "what do you actually do?" So it was exciting to hear all the different things that our friends were working on and the variety made the conference not boring. Every talk was different.

The Second Conference (2014)

We held the second conference the following summer. It was held at Berkeley. That one grew, it grew a lot. So we moved from the ten or twelve speakers we had to twenty. We had two tracks. Laura Buchak, a philosophy professor at Berkeley was the keynote speaker. On Stanford campus, we began

doing speaker prep. That excited me because the students initially were like *I know how to do this!* I was concerned that they were going to think that they had done a passion talk so now I know how my faith integrates with my work, I am done. But this time around, they were wanting speaker prep. As a result, the talks got better. Like I said we went from ten to twenty.

The Third Conference (2015)

Our third conference was last summer. That was held at Stanford. We had 23/24 speakers. Dave Vosburg from Harvey Mudd College gave the keynote address. I gave the closing keynote. This time faculty showed up and did some passion talks. Albeit one of them was an alumnus, who is now faculty at Sacramento State, that is Steve Lee, who some of you met here, Yuki's husband. He gave a passion talk on his PhD. journey. I think there might have been one more faculty.

We also had some people from Google come give passion talks. That was an interesting experience. We discovered that industry and academia don't necessarily mesh as far as how they speak. The Google people thought 'These talks are really boring.' They weren't near as flashy in their presentation style on the academic side. Whereas Google people really wanted to make their presentations shine. So it was an interesting lesson that we learned.

About 110 people registered and attended. The other thing that interested me was some faculty came ... because I have a faculty group that I know of at Stanford ... I basically emailed a bunch of faculties. I said, "This is happening and we would love for you to come." Bill Newsome came, some of you may have heard of him as he heads up Obama's map the brain project. He is a neuroscientist and he used to be IV Grad's faculty advisor. A super busy man and he came. So there was something about it. He gave up his Saturday morning to come listen to passion talks. I thought that that was interesting.

In the prep again at Stanford, it was really interesting to see that they kind of raised the level of preparation one notch higher. Students would gather, they had little meetings to test their passion talk idea on each other. And then they wrote their talks early and practiced on each other. So that has been really interesting to see how that process evolve. They are sort of taking it more seriously. They also started vetting the abstracts more carefully. They put a word limit on the abstract length because they had to read them all. They did read them all and they did refuse some. The main limit put on them was that you have to talk about what you know. You need to demonstrate that your talk matches with your resume qualifications. Because we had a few talks where this was not the case. One guy was like: 'I am interested in movies, so I am going to talk about God and movies.' But it had nothing to do with his research and another speaker at our first conference actually has media as his field. So his talk was kind of altered a bit. ... He was very gracious, this guy, and he modified his talk because this other person had given a talk that was not technically up to par. So we actually said, we need to see what the degrees are you are doing and what your talk is about.

The other type of talk we are kind of screening out is the kind of straight apologetic talk unless you are a theologian that is it matches your qualifications. So we have an economist who does math and he does

give apologetics talks, but he uses mathematical analogies, so we let that one through. Another thing we are trying to do is to get people to focus their topic. So you get these abstracts which say for example: 'I do law and I see God in the law.' No, you need to narrow that down and identify what you are going to talk about specifically. So that has been interesting and the students all spearheaded that. I didn't read any of the abstracts. I saw the emails going back and forth with feedback to the speakers. For example, some said 'well we would love to accept you and we will accept you if you show us A, B, C, etc. So they were pretty professional about it. So that was interesting.

Some Interesting Issues and Challenges

There have been some interesting issues that have arisen in passion talks. Like I said there have been a lot of debates among the students themselves about what a passion talk is and actually one of the key debates arose because some people were wanting to let anyone do a passion talk, a Christian or a non-Christian. Others were like no this is for Christians only. So, can a non-Christian do a passion talk? There was a 20 page email string between our students on whether they were going to let this into the conference. In the end, they decided for the conference that they wanted to see some kind of confession of faith. That was kind of controversial. In the end, they are not saying sign the doctrinal basis statement or anything like that, but they wanted some kind of confession from the speaker of their Christian faith. I think though it will be very interesting to see. I don't see why we can't do a conference where speakers bring their worldview and are really explicit about how does my religious or no religion stance impact and influence my research. I think that would actually be a real service to the academy. I think it would expose a lot of where people are coming from. I think the bigger question is whether people would do them. But I think it would be really interesting to see and I don't see why you couldn't have an interfaith passion talks conference.

I think it is ok to say this, but the Trinidad and Tobago conference that Denise and Andre are organizing might be a place to try this. Denise and I were talking because I think she does want to talk about religion and research. I am like, we should do interfaith passion talks there. It will be interesting to see if that actually works out.

This whole idea of trying to define it ahead of time has been interesting and the students actually drew a line there and said let's stay in this particular comfort zone for now. So I think we will need to try branching out on a smaller scale and at a more organic level.

I think our biggest challenge is people power. The last conference was really big and logistically complicated. So we were pretty worn out. The Stanford leaders were pretty worn out and we have kind of paid a price for that this year. So we are going to take a break this summer. Stanford will still do passion talks in-house, but we are not going to hold a big conference. That is a big question, as to whether we do another big one. I think we would need multiple healthy chapters to pull off another area conference. That is our biggest challenge.

So passion talks have been pretty important for us and just starting our fellowship on the journey towards integration, better integration. I don't think we are there yet, but it has been an important catalyst. It has also been a lot of fun.

Author: Wendy Quay Honeycutt

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