Bob: In 1997, Dr. Rosaria Champagne was a tenured professor at Syracuse University. She was a committed feminist who had no real belief in God. There was one other aspect to her story that made her an unlikely convert.

Rosaria: I, at the time that I started reading the Bible, and I, at the time that I started meeting with a Christian pastor, was in a lesbian relationship. It wasn’t just my first lesbian relationship. I fully embraced the lesbian community.

Bob: This is FamilyLife Today for Monday, July 27th. Our host is the President of FamilyLife®, Dennis Rainey, and I’m Bob Lepine. Dr. Rosaria Champagne is now Dr. Rosaria Champagne Butterfield, a pastor’s wife and a homeschooling mother of four adopted children. We’ll hear her journey this week. Stay with us.

Dennis: Right. And Barbara had read it as well.

Bob: Yes. And in fact, I would say—I try to keep a running list of books that I read during the year; and this book wound up being the top book I read in 2013 because it’s a great story—but the greatness of the story is the transformation that takes place in what we’re going to hear about today.

Dennis: Yes. It’s not often you hear someone refer to their conversion to Christ as a train wreck; but our guest, [Laughter] on today’s broadcast, describes it that way. Rosaria Butterfield joins us on FamilyLife Today. Rosaria—welcome to our broadcast.

Rosaria: Thank you so much. I’m delighted to be here with you.

Dennis: I remember when Bob walked in—and I was getting it from him, here at the office—and Barbara had read a review of your book. She said, “This is something you ought to do radio on.”

First of all, just to introduce you to our listeners, Rosaria has been married to her husband Kent since 2001. They have four children. She is a former English professor
who was tenured at Syracuse University. That’s kind of where we’re going to go back to—to start this story.

Rosaria: Okay.

Dennis: And she has written a book called *The Secret Thoughts of an Unlikely Convert*, subtitled *An English Professor’s Journey into Christian Faith*.

Bob: And it’s not unusual that English professors would come to Christ [Laughter]—but your particular interest and lifestyle, back in the ’90s—that’s what made your conversion unlikely; isn’t it?

Rosaria: Yes, definitely. So, just a quick answer would be: “Definitely.” When I first started reading the Bible, I was reading the Bible because I was working on a post-tenure book. It was a lesbian, feminist critique of the Bible. I was concerned about the rise of the religious right / I was threatened by the rise of the religious right, and I wanted to read this book that got all these people into trouble. So, that’s where I started. But I guess, because my life just seemed sort of boring and normal to me, I find it sort of strange [Laughter] sometimes that my journey seems so odd; but I guess that’s—

Dennis: Well, let’s just peel it back a little bit.

Rosaria: Okay, let’s peel it back.

Dennis: Let’s talk about—you were a feminist.

Rosaria: Oh, yes, absolutely.

Dennis: Yes.

Rosaria: Yes, committed.

Dennis: Explain what kind of feminist. I mean—there is a spectrum.

Rosaria: There’s a spectrum, absolutely. I firmly believed that a feminist world and life view was a moral and ethical approach to living—and, in fact, one that would get us out of so many of the problems that we were facing. When I looked at the world—and I saw racism, and homophobia, and violence of all kinds—you know, there was no way I could look at this world and say, “Oh, you know, obviously, a loving God is in control of it.” So, I—like many, many other people—rolled up my sleeves and said, “Okay, how are you going to think our way out of it?” So, feminism, to me, was a very broad umbrella that allowed for the pursuit of individual rights, within what I perceived to be a moral framework.

Dennis: And you viewed Christians as—
Rosaria: —dangerous.

Dennis: —dangerous; okay.

Rosaria: —dangerous, anti-intellectual people.

Dennis: Yes. They weren’t thinkers, and they weren’t readers—you wrote about it in your book.

Rosaria: Right; right. And that was—that’s not very nice; is it? [Laughter] I am a Christian right now; and I could be in charge of the self-help group: “Over-Readers Anonymous.” [Laughter] So, it’s not nice to say; but that was my perception. My perception was—as a university professor, I met a number of Christians—this is how these people came across.

Now, whether they came across this way because I was deep in my sin or whether this is an accurate portrayal, I will let you all decide. But folks who would tell me that Jesus is the answer—without caring to even hear about what some of my questions might be—you know, questions and answers go together. There is a logical relationship between the two. So, it seemed, to me, just a strange mixture of superstition and patriarchy—where God, the Father, and the god of patriarchy came together to oppress people like me.

As a university professor, one of my jobs was to be on a war against stupid. So, this is where my war took me, guys! [Laughter]

Bob: Your presupposition in life was: “If we can liberate women and eliminate patriarchy,”—

Rosaria: Yes.

Bob: —“then, we will solve many of the evils that we are facing in our world today.”

Rosaria: Right; absolutely. Back it up, even further—my belief was that people were inherently good and that the right to individual choice-making was an inherent good. There were material structures that stood between good people making good choices. Feminism, combined with Marxism, offered a way of unlocking that potential—that is what I believed.

Bob: Somewhere, in your life, your feminist/Marxist presuppositions and your personal sexuality collided.

Rosaria: Yes, they did. That’s right. So, the big story for some people—which is not a big story for me, but that’s okay—the big story for some people was that I, at the time
that I started reading the Bible, and I, at the time that I started meeting with a Christian pastor—was in a lesbian relationship. And it wasn’t just my first lesbian relationship. I fully embraced the lesbian community. It sort of snuck up on me. I don’t know how else to say it. I was not—I know people who would say when they were nine years old they remember feeling attracted to people of the same sex. I do not remember that. I don’t remember feeling attracted to anything but books and horses. [Laughter]

So, I went off to college; but when I went to college, I met my first boyfriend. That was a very heady experience. I defined myself as heterosexual and presumed that I would have a heterosexual life. Now, I was also a feminist—I was not keen on marriage. I did not think I would ever want to get married, or have children, or any of that.

But I had said to myself, at that point when I met my first lesbian lover, that: “I’m not going back. You know, this is a more moral choice. I am happier. I can be myself.” I loved being in a relationship with somebody who shares my—truly, my world and life view. So, I thought that I was there for life. That’s part of why I wasn’t a closeted lesbian. My research program went from 19th century feminist studies and it moved into Queer Theory—which is a post-modern, post-structural extension of gay and lesbian studies. So, I went on record as a queer theorist and published articles in that vein.

Dennis: You scooted past a statement that I want to stop—

Rosaria: [Laughter] Okay.

Dennis: —and just have you unpack a bit.

Rosaria: Okay.

Dennis: You said, “It was a more moral”—

Rosaria: I did.

Dennis: —“choice.”

Rosaria: I know.

Dennis: How can this be a more moral faith when someone has a post-modern view—

Rosaria: Right; right.

Dennis: —which doesn’t believe in absolutes?

Rosaria: Right. That’s right. Well, morality doesn’t depend upon absolutes. Morality depends, especially within a post-modern context, on decency for the moment. There are a number of things that you do not have to worry about in the lesbian community.
For the most part, you do not have to worry about sexually-transmitted diseases, and you do not have to worry about unplanned pregnancy. That cleans up a whole lot of things for women.

In fact, I remember being at a gay pride march once. There was a placard from the Christian community. After the Leviticus verse—that everybody has to quote, of course—the placard said: “AIDS is God’s curse on homosexuality.” Then, there was another placard—a responsive placard—from the gay and lesbian community that said: “If AIDS is God’s curse on homosexuality, then, lesbians must be God’s chosen people.”

**Dennis:** Because you can’t get it?

**Rosaria:** Not in your vanilla forms of lesbian sexuality; no. No, you just can’t.

**Bob:** You also just made the statement that some people kind of consider what we’re talking about here to be at the crux of your story, but you don’t.

**Rosaria:** Right. I don’t. I don’t, but I will entertain this. [Laughter] I’m also—

**Bob:** You were a feminist, lesbian, queer theorist, tenured professor—and you don’t see that as kind of integral to the whole idea of the transformation that’s about to happen in your life.

**Rosaria:** Sure. Sure. Sure. It’s integral; but see, the train wreck was about my heart. The train wreck was about starting out with this premise that this book—the Bible, here—was filled with contradictions. It was an oppressive treatise against women, and African Americans, and everybody else in between. It was sentimental in some places. It was mythological in some places; but it was hardly, hardly, hardly the backdrop of a world view that anybody could sustain.

I went from believing that *firmly* to, many years later—after reading it through many, many times, meeting with a pastor, meeting with various other members of this church community—to seeing this book as an organic whole, whose canonicity was more solid than any other canonicity I had ever come up against—that had an organic revelation that started from Genesis / ended with Revelation—that offered an invitation to me—me, you know—me of all people! Right?—that one!—to enter into a covenant with a holy God, who would reveal His will for my life and to whom I could share prayers that He would hear. *That* is the story.

**Dennis:** Okay. Let’s go back, then, to a little men’s group that came to Syracuse University. Promise Keepers—

**Rosaria:** Yes, they did.
Dennis: —came to town—

Rosaria: They came to town.

Dennis: —and held a giant rally on the university.

Rosaria: Right.

Dennis: And you, being the proud feminist that you were, did what?

Rosaria: Well, you know—I don't know that being a proud feminist—I was on a war against stupid. So, what I did is—I spent ten minutes of my precious time, and I knocked out an editorial to the newspaper. I presumed it would be a little dinky editorial and that nobody would ever see it. Well, they gave me a full page. It generated a great deal of rejoinders.

Bob: Your editorial said: “Syracuse should have nothing to do with these patriarchs coming to our campus.”

Rosaria: It did, and it even called them a cult. It—you know, I was just being myself, gentlemen! [Laughter] I don't know what else to say! Yet, I got all kinds of responses and—

Dennis: And you had two boxes—

Rosaria: I did.

Dennis: —or two sections on your desk.

Rosaria: Right—boxes because I don't like a messy desk—right. You've got to keep it on the ground. This was back in the days when you had Xerox® boxes—I was using that expression—and someone said, “What's a Xerox box?” [Laughter] That dates me somewhat. I did—I had two Xerox boxes. One, I kept for hate mail. One, I kept for fan mail. Then, this one letter came in. It wasn't hate mail, and it wasn't fan mail. I had to figure out what to do with it.

Bob: And the first thing you did with it was wad it up and throw it in the trash?

Rosaria: Yes, absolutely; absolutely. Well, I don't think I wadded it up because it was going to go in the recycling bin because I was a good feminist! [Laughter] It was not going to go in the trash! Come on, gentlemen! [Laughter]

Bob: So, you put it in the recycle bin.

Rosaria: Work with me—work with me.
Bob: Well, what did this letter, that didn’t fit either box, say?

Rosaria: Well, it was kind; and it was gentle. Yet, it was also clearly written from a Christian world and life view. It was from Ken Smith, who is my dear friend and became my first pastor. But at that time, he was just this dude who wrote me a letter. It asked me some basic questions that were genuine questions, and he wasn’t answering those questions for me. I admired that—I really liked that.

I was also a good user, at the time. I admired the fact that here was somebody who knew a lot about the Bible. I was going to need to read the Bible for my new research project; and I thought, “Well, you know, I’ll bet this is somebody who could help me with my research.” At the bottom of the letter, Ken asked me to call him back; and so, I did. I thought these were questions that needed to be aired on the phone. We had such a lively conversation on the phone—that he invited me to come to his house for dinner.

Sometimes, people don’t know this—but the gay and lesbian community is also a community quite given to hospitality. I tell people this—that I’m a pastor’s wife now. I believe, strongly, that hospitality is just the ground zero of the Christian life, and of evangelism, and of everything else that we do, apart from the formal worship of God. But I tell people that I honed my hospitality gifts in my former queer community. So, when Ken invited me to have dinner with him—that seemed really like a great idea. He already seemed like my kind of people.

Bob: But you came with a little bit of a chip on your shoulder—a bottle of wine under your arm; right?

Rosaria: Well, but that was normal! I didn’t realize—see, now, I’m a teetotaler; but then, I wasn’t! [Laughter]

Dennis: But describe your haircut. You said—

Rosaria: I did. I had a butch haircut. Yes, yes. And yes—and I had the bumper stickers. I did realize, that when I pulled my car into his driveway, you know—“What was the—

Bob: “What were the neighbors going to think?” You were kind of proud of the fact that the neighbors might be a little bit—

Rosaria: Well, you know what? Here’s what I discovered in Ken’s house. That door was always opening and closing. People, from all walks of life—I met them at that table. I did not meet Christians who shared a narrowly-bounded, priggish world view. That is not what I met. I met people who could talk openly about sexuality and politics and did not drop down dead in the process.
Bob: You know what? When I first read your book, one of the things I got most excited about was the model of Ken Smith.

Rosaria: Oh, yes, absolutely.

Bob: I just—I was high-fiving and going, “We need to read this—all of us—to understand: ‘Here’s how you do this!’”

Dennis: “Here’s how you engage somebody who doesn’t think and believe like you do.”

Rosaria: That’s right.

Bob: Yes.

Rosaria: But you have to understand that was normal for Ken. Ken didn’t say: “Oh great! We’re going to have the lesbian over for dinner. Let’s be sure to share the gospel as soon as she walks through the door!” or, “Let’s...” He—this was normal for Ken. Ken cares about the heart. In fact, I found Ken’s business card in one of the books I was looking at for some writing that I’m doing. The business card said: “When you’re ready to talk about God, give me a call.” That’s what the business card says. It’s just—that’s how Ken was—it is how Ken is.

There’s a book out, right now—that many people are reading. I love it—I’m reading it. I’m getting some of my neighbors to read it. It’s called The Art of Neighboring. Before that book, there was Ken Smith. He and Floy, his wife,—his beautiful wonderful wife, who was my first spiritual mother—that’s what they did. So, I became a regular at Ken’s house; and Ken and Floy became a regular at my house.

They did two startling things the first time I had dinner at their house—two things that were against the rule book that I believed all Christians followed. They did not share the gospel with me, and they did not invite me to church. But, at the end of our dinner, when Ken extended his hand, and I closed mine in it, he said: “We’re neighbors. Neighbors should be friends.” I found myself being in complete agreement with Ken.

Also, Ken had a way of asking questions; and he had an authority—you know, I had been in a queer community. I had been in a feminist community. In my community, women ran the show. I had not encountered a man like Ken in my whole life. I found that his gentle authority—that when he asked me a question—in fact, I left his house that night and I thought: “I cannot believe you said those things, Rosaria! Why did you give him all that material?! I found myself actually answering his questions honestly instead of answering with the programmed—

Bob: —the party line.

Rosaria: —the party line, exactly.
Dennis: Your defenses were down because he had done a good job of loving you.

Rosaria: That’s right. And you know what? It started with the prayer. I had heard plenty of prayers before—Planned Parenthood, gay pride marches—you know, the prayers—the crumbs are there for the heathen, like me, to hear. I had heard—I could have written—you know those are hermeneutic; right? I’m an English professor. I love to study different art forms: “There is an art form to that prayer.”

That was not Ken’s prayer. It was vulnerable and honest. He prayed to a God who is not a god I had ever been introduced to. One of the things Ken asked me that night—and I still cannot believe I actually answered him honestly!—I mean, it was just so—it was so out of character for me—but he asked me—he said: “Well, what do you really believe? I mean, do you really—you know, you just really don’t believe in anything? What do you really believe?” I said: “I don’t know what I believe. I was raised Catholic, and I’m now a Unitarian. I don’t really know what I believe,” which was true but not anything I had said out loud.

Dennis: You know, your story is a great reminder, I think, to each of us, who are followers of Jesus Christ—that we need to be using our homes—

Rosaria: Yes, that’s right.

Dennis: —to be more hospitable and to reach out with kindness; but as we do that—maybe, instead of providing the answers to people—instead, as he did with you, ask a few questions to find out where the other person really is—

Rosaria: Right.

Dennis: —and what do they believe and not believe. I think, sometimes, we are so zealous, on behalf of the truth, we want to get to the bottom line.

Rosaria: That’s right.

Dennis: If you’re going to do that in an effective way, you first of all have to find out where you deliver the bottom line. The best way to do that is by asking some great questions.

Rosaria: That’s right.

Bob: Well, and the story is not over yet. In fact, this week, we’re going to hear more of this conversation; but you’ve shared your story in a book that you wrote, back a few years ago, called The Secret Thoughts of an Unlikely Convert, which is a book we’ve got in our FamilyLife Today Resource Center. We also have your brand-new book which is called Openness Unhindered: Further Thoughts of an Unlikely Convert on
Sexual Identity and Union with Christ. And it's the follow-up / it's equally compelling, very well-written.

I would encourage our listeners to get a copy of either or both of these books. You can go to FamilyLifeToday.com. Click the link in the upper left-hand corner of the screen that says, “GO DEEPER.” You will see both The Secret Thoughts of an Unlikely Convert and Openness Unhindered—both by Dr. Rosaria Butterfield. You can order them from us, online, if you’d like; or you can call 1-800-FL-TODAY—1-800-358-6329. That's 1-800-“F” as in family, “L” as in life, and then, the word, “TODAY.”

You know, I think what makes a program like today’s program so important is because so much of what we hear over and over again in our culture today is a very different kind of story. And I stop and think: “Where are the places where folks can hear the kind of conversation we’ve had here today and hear stories like what Dr. Rosaria Butterfield ha shared with us here today?”

FamilyLife exists to declare that what the Bible has to say about marriage and family is true. And I appreciate those listeners who join with us in that mission by helping to support the ministry of FamilyLife Today. We could not do all that we’re doing if it weren’t for your part. So, thanks to those of you who are Legacy Partners and who contribute on a monthly basis; and thanks to those of you who, from time to time, will get in touch with us and say, “This ministry does matter, and we want to make sure it continues on the air in our community and in cities all across the United States.”

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Now, tomorrow, we’re going to hear just how profound and how powerful simple hospitality can be in someone’s life as we continue to hear from Rosaria Butterfield. Hope you can be back with us tomorrow.

I want to thank our engineer today, Keith Lynch, along with our entire broadcast production team. On behalf of our host, Dennis Rainey, I’m Bob Lepine. We will see you back tomorrow for another edition of FamilyLife Today.

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