FamilyLife Today® Radio Transcript

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What Is Hospitality?

Guest: Rosaria Butterfield
From the series: Secret Thoughts of an Unlikely Convert (Day 2 of 3)
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Bob: Rosaria Butterfield was a committed feminist and a lesbian when a local pastor and his wife invited her over for dinner. What she found in that dinner, and as she started attending his church, was that her caricature of Christians and Christianity was off the mark.

Rosaria: 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. Ken Smith made it so clear to me that he could accept me right where I was—that there is a difference between acceptance and approval.

Bob: This is FamilyLife Today for Tuesday, July 28th. Our host is the President of FamilyLife®, Dennis Rainey, and I’m Bob Lepine. We’ll hear today how a Presbyterian pastor was used by God to share the gospel with a lesbian college professor and about the remarkable transformation that God did in her life.

1:00

Stay tuned.

And welcome to FamilyLife Today. Thanks for joining us. You know, if we were going to sit down in our communities and think: “Where might there be a fertile mission field—people who would be open to hearing the message of the gospel?” I don’t think we would think: “Well, I bet the queer studies program, down at the university—I bet they are dying for somebody to come in and share about Jesus with them.” You know?

Dennis: I wouldn’t think so.

Bob: But the story we’re hearing this week is the story of an unlikely convert. At least, that’s what it says on the front of this book.

Dennis: That’s right. Rosaria Butterfield joins us, again, on FamilyLife Today. Rosaria—welcome back.

Rosaria: Thank you so much. I am delighted to be here.
Dennis: I want you to unpack what Bob just said because some of our listeners are going: “Wait a second! Bob just used the word, ‘queer.’”

Rosaria: He did. He did.

Dennis: And before we came into the studio—

Rosaria: Right. We talked about it.

Dennis: —I asked you about this. I think a lot of our listeners would—

Rosaria: Sure.

Dennis: —like to know what the background is. Let me just introduce you, though, before you answer my question. Rosaria has been married to her husband Kent since 2001. They have four children. She is a former English professor at Syracuse University. She has written a book called The Secret Thoughts of an Unlikely Convert.

Bob: And did I say something wrong when I said, “queer”?

Rosaria: You did not! No, you did not. Gay and lesbian studies started as a way of understanding the lives and appreciating the contributions made by gay men and lesbian women—but in a context of post-modernism and post-structuralism—

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—even the—what we call normative gender of that statement: men/women—even the normative gender of that statement has become what we call contested or something that is only fixed in the eyes of a culture, not in the hearts of people. So, Queer Theory is the academic manifestation of the post-modern and post-structural world views as it applies to a person’s sexuality.

Bob: So, in 1997, studying/advancing Queer Theory, as a tenured professor at Syracuse—

Rosaria: Well, I was tenured in ’98—

Bob: Okay.

Rosaria: —but you know.

Bob: And you’re in a lesbian relationship, at the time.
Rosaria: Absolutely.

Bob: You write an editorial in the Syracuse newspaper, talking about these patriarchs who are coming to Syracuse—the Promise Keepers group: “No way should we let them near the campus.”

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Rosaria: Right; right.

Bob: You get hate mail, and you get fan mail, and you get one letter from a pastor who says, “Let’s talk.”

Rosaria: Right.

Bob: And that conversation—the beginning of that conversation put you on an unexpected path.

Rosaria: Yes, it did—absolutely; absolutely.

My husband’s name is Kent. Kent is the pastor of the First Reformed Presbyterian Church of Durham. He just finished a series on hospitality—a preaching series. It was really interesting for me to sit—many, many years later—and remember that hospitality does not mean fellowship. Hospitality means bringing the stranger in. More than that, it means going to the gate, getting the stranger, and bringing him or her in.

I think, sometimes, Christians think we’re practicing hospitality when we have our homeschool friends from church over for lunch. Well, that’s fellowship, and that’s very good; but it’s not hospitality.

5:00

Dennis: You mentioned that the gay and lesbian community was good at this.

Rosaria: Very good at this. So, every Thursday night, my partner and I would open our home to anybody in the gay and lesbian community who wanted to just come in, talk to us, and tell us what is going on. I tell pastors—you know—“Hints from Eloise.”

Bob: “It’s a good strategy here.”

Rosaria: “It’s a good strategy,”—just open it up—don’t call it a Bible study. Call it a—just whatever—and just find out who your people are.
Dennis: Give us some idea of who would come over to your house when you and your partner invited.

Rosaria: Well, I lived—first of all, we are not—I think people don’t understand, sometimes, that at a university—and especially, where I was coming from—the gay and lesbian community was highly-respected, valued, and appreciated. So, it could be anyone—you know, graduate students, or faculty members, or neighbors. We might talk about some environmental issue. We might talk about: “So and So’s dog needs to be put to sleep, and we should do something.”

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You know, it was simply a day to catch up and know how to be hand-on-hand with one another.

Bob: And the people coming might be gay or might be straight. They—the—

Rosaria: Oh, yes.

Bob: There’s a diversity of folks.

Rosaria: Oh, yes! Thank you for mentioning that. The gay and lesbian community is a diverse community—and hospitality is—

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—I believe it is God’s ordained path for evangelism.

In First Corinthians—when God tells us that no temptation will befall you except for that which He will provide a way of escape—I want all of our Christian listeners to know that, from the bottom of my heart, I believe that your home and your church is a way of escape for somebody—somebody that God has called. But if your door is closed or if you can’t get over yourself—and maybe I can talk a little bit about this—you know that we pray, “Lord, may there be more of You and less of me.” We, as Christians, pray for a relinquished life. If that is so, then, our churches and our homes are the way of escape—but that has not historically been the truth; right?

8:00

Dennis: Right. We’ve had a lot of judgmental walls and bars—

Rosaria: Right; right.

Dennis: —on our homes instead of doors, at that point.
Rosaria: That’s right. You know, I think it’s a good question. I’m sure that there are people listening, saying: “But I thought she had small children! What is she saying?” and “Where do we draw the line?” There are lines to draw. I’m not suggesting that you should be careless, but I am suggesting that we should examine some things. Probably, the most important thing to examine is “Who is Jesus?” and “Is grace sufficient?” and “Have I been forgiven of my sins?”

Dennis: And that’s really what I want you to finish unpacking, in terms of your story with Pastor Ken, who wrote you the letter—as Bob mentioned earlier—and didn’t take you to task.

Rosaria: No. No.

Dennis: He asked you a bunch of questions that were hard for you to answer—invited you over to his home.

Rosaria: Right.

Dennis: And you went and had a delightful time.

Rosaria: I did.

9:00

I did. I met Christians who were thoughtful, and engaging, and smart—and did not use the Bible to punctuate the end of a sentence—but rather to deepen it and had a vital faith life.

And you know—the other thing I want to say about Ken, which was really interesting—it was not like Ken had some—went to some PhD program, where he developed a para-church ministry on how to minister to homosexuals—not at all! But Ken knew Jesus. He knew Him really well / he knows Him really well. Therefore, Ken could walk the long journey over to me and help me walk that long journey back to Jesus because he didn’t need a para-church ministry. Ken didn’t need to find somebody in the church who had a daughter who was a lesbian—he didn’t—

10:00

—he pretty much presumed that he could ask me some straight-up questions, I could answer them, and nobody was going to fall down dead. I think the fact that I wanted to read the Bible, even for the wrong reasons, was delightful to Ken. You know, as a pastor’s wife now, I will tell you anybody who is excited to read the Bible—we don’t care!—just start reading!

Bob: What your motive is doesn’t matter.
Rosaria: It doesn’t matter! [Laughter]

Bob: Did you intentionally say things to Ken to try to shock him? Did you try to—

Rosaria: I don’t remember, intentionally, trying to scare Ken. I think I tried to tell him
that I was a member of a Unitarian Church, in the hopes that he wouldn’t invite me to
church; but I didn’t realize that he wasn’t planning on inviting me to church. He was
planning on bringing the church to me, a heathen.

Bob: You said, “He and his wife Floy came to your house.”

Rosaria: Oh, yes.

Bob: Like, did they come on Thursday nights?

Rosaria: No, well, I don’t think so. No, no, no. Not in that kind of thing, but what
happened—this is how it started.

11:00

Ken and Floy and I became friends. They let me do things for them—which is really nice
because, sometimes, Christians forget that a really good way to be loving is to let other
people use their gifts. I loved to bake bread and make soup. So, if somebody was sick, I
loved doing that. They let me serve them in that way. Then, they served me in many
ways. We just had a grand old time. In fact, I felt like: “Wow! I have finally arrived! I am a
real liberal! I finally have friends who are not in the queer community and have PhD’s in
the humanities. Look! I have these evangelical”—

Dennis: These right-wingers!

Rosaria: —“these straight, evangelical, conservative Christians; and I hang out with
them. I have arrived!” Then, Ken said something really funny—well, it was the gauntlet
moment. He said, “Rosaria, I am concerned about the English Department.” I should tell
you I was the undergraduate coordinator of the English program. So, I was a little
concerned about where this was going. He said: “Well, you’ve read the Bible now. You
see that it has every genre.

12:00

“It is a beautiful book of literature. I would like to go and speak to your English majors
and tell them why they should be reading the Bible.” Well, my claws came out.
[Laughter] I was—suddenly, the mother bear in me was born; and I just made it very
clear that—
Bob: —that wasn’t going to happen.

Rosaria: —over my dead body and through my claws.

Dennis: That was brilliant though!

Rosaria: Well, let me tell you what happened next! It occurred to me, though, that this lecture would be pretty advantageous for me because I am a student of hermeneutics; but I do not know the hermeneutical traditions that an evangelical Christian uses. I know about canonicity, but I don’t know about the canons that legitimated these 66 books. I thought to myself: “Hmm. You know what? I’d like to hear this lecture.”

So, before I took Ken’s head off, I said, “How about an audience of one?”

13:00

And this is probably the most spectacular thing about Ken Smith. You think about it—often, in the church, we want to talk to a thousand people. We get frustrated: “Oh, so few people came to this worship service,” or, “Oh, we had this outreach; and there were only—well, one.” Ken came for me—for one. I still have the notes. He lectured for an hour. I thought that man would never shut up! [Laughter] I was fuming! I was fuming. So, when he got to the end—finally, he stopped! [Laughter] You know, “Hallelujah! He stopped!” I said, “Ken, you have one book that declares it is the true truth—and it does so on—all things—ontology. It claims to be true because of its own truth claim! I mean, that’s just—

14:00

—you get thrown out of the game for playing that way. I have—what?—a hundred, on the bookshelf behind you, that says you are wrong.” He just clapped his hands and grinned. He said: “Exactly! And next week, we’re going to talk about that!” [Laughter]

Bob: It wasn’t just a lecture. He was taking you to a class, here.

Rosaria: He did—a one—a one student.

Dennis: And so, what happened? I mean, how did you find your way on that journey?

Rosaria: Well, yes. That night, I remember walking my dog and thinking, “My world would be a very different world if I believed these things.”

Dennis: In fact, you were starting to change, even—

Rosaria: I was.

Dennis: —in the midst of that. Your friend / the transgender friend—
Rosaria: My friend, Jay—well, that’s right. She had cornered me, in the kitchen, at one of my Thursday night events. That was important, too, by the way, because I felt like, in some ways, her response gave me permission.

15:00

So, this was important—she cornered me in the kitchen and said: “Look, before you pour any more glasses of wine or fill any more pasta bowls, you need to come clean with me. All of this Bible reading is changing you, and I’m worried.”

I sat down in the chair. I felt like I was going to throw up. I said: “What if it’s true? What if it’s true—and you and I and everyone we know—we’re all in trouble. What if Jesus is a real and risen Lord, Who sits at the right of God, the Father? What if all of this is true? What if Jesus died for the sins of His people? What if healing happens through the stripes of Jesus? What if He took on a curse so that people could be blessed? What if all of that—that whole story—

16:00

—I mean, do you know that story?—what if all that is true?”

Then, she sat down and looked like she was as bad off as I was, at that point, and said: “I know! I was a Presbyterian minister for 15 years. I prayed that God would heal me, but He didn’t. If you’d like, I’ll pray that God will heal you.” That threw me for a loop: “What does it mean that she prayed for healing but didn’t get it?” That conversation left me a jumble of raw emotions. That was the thing about this whole journey—that it was just eating me alive.

So, the next day, I came home from work, got the mail, and started to let the dogs out. I found a crate of books by my door, and it was from Jay. It was, I presume, her theological library. I picked up the first book and it was Calvin’s *Institutes*.

17:00

I was just flipping through it. I love to see other people’s handwriting in the margin of books because—especially friends—I love to see the journey that friends have taken. Right there, next to the exposition of Romans 1, in Jay’s handwriting, it said: “Watch out. This is where you will fall.” Then, I went to the Bible. I opened it up, and I looked at Romans 1. I’d already read it; but this time, it just hit me, between the eyes, that “God gives some over to a degrading passion.” I had never thought about my life in those terms before.
That made me want to just throw the Bible and everything in the trash—you know, ignore Ken’s emails and phone calls. It made me think about this. So, I tried to do that, of course; but it didn’t work because Ken believes in the perseverance of the saints.

18:00

So, there we were; [Laughter] but one of things it did make me realize—it was just a small, little chink in my armor—but it made me realize that I’d been reading the Bible, feeling perfectly justified that I would be the judge of it.

I thought about a question—it’s back to God’s authority—that “If God, through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, used chosen men to write this Bible—and these are truly His God-breathed words, then, who has authority over God?” and “Why do I feel that I should be the judge of the Bible? What if”—and I just kept it as a logic question. I didn’t go there right away—“What if I allowed the Bible to be the judge of me?” because it occurred to me that I was truly trying to write a book that understood how evangelical Christians got into this dilemma.

19:00

It struck me that that is how Ken Smith read the Bible. This may seem so obvious to people—I don’t know—millions of Christian listeners, thinking, “That was really interesting?” But that was really interesting because, in a post-modern context, “authority” is—

Dennis: Right.

Rosaria: —you put it in quotation marks because it only exists because of Oz behind the curtain—it isn’t real!

So, that’s when the question of God’s authority entered into my thinking process, as I was reading. It did occur to me because I—obviously, for example—what I am doing on this radio station—I can talk for a really long time [Laughter] and not stop! You guys might have a million questions; and here, it’s just like a train wreck; isn’t it gentlemen? See, you get to experience it with me!

Dennis: No, it’s transformation.

20:00

Rosaria: Well, but it did make me realize that I wanted to judge what God said about homosexuality; but I didn’t even want to hear the other side—that did strike me as anti-intellectual.
Dennis: You discovered that you’re not going to judge God; but in fact, you’re ultimately accountable to Him.

Rosaria: Well, I didn’t discover that right away! See, you are giving me more credit! [Laughter]

Dennis: Well, but you are on the road—

Bob: You are on the path.

Rosaria: I’m on the road. I’m on the road.

Dennis: —and to that person who identifies with you—

Rosaria: That’s right. I’m on the road.

Dennis: I just want to—I want to read to them the words of Jesus Christ in John, Chapter 5—He said: “Truly, truly, I say to you, ‘Whoever hears my word and believes Him who sent Me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment but has passed from death to life.”

Rosaria: Amen!

Dennis: It really is an issue of faith and of belief. And to that person, who is listening to Rosaria—

21:00

—and identifies with her journey—maybe, all that’s left for you to do is to finally give in to the ultimate Authority.

Bob: And that’s the point. It’s an issue of authority. Who is in charge—you or somebody else? And when you come to that moment—

Dennis: And is that somebody else, Jesus Christ?

Bob: That’s right. When you come to that moment—to go, “If I’m looking around, if it’s not me, who is it?”—there is only one person who stands who has authority—all authority in heaven and earth has been given to Him, according to Matthew, Chapter 28. That’s the issue that you had to confront—the issue you write about so well in the book that you’ve written—again, it’s called The Secret Thoughts of an Unlikely Convert. And we’ve got it in our FamilyLife Today Resource Center, along with your brand-new book, which is called Openness Unhindered: Further Thoughts of an Unlikely Convert on Sexual Identity and Union with Christ.
I’d encourage our listeners:

22:00

“Get a copy of either or both of these books when you go to FamilyLifeToday.com.” Click the link in the upper left-hand corner of the screen that says, “GO DEEPER,” and you’ll find links to both books by Rosaria Butterfield—Secret Thoughts of an Unlikely Convert and Openness Unhindered. Find them both, online, at FamilyLifeToday.com; or call to order—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 we live in a time when a lot of people just wonder whether it’s safe to address this issue with friends or family members—whether this is something we can talk about openly without people assuming that we’re hateful, or that we are bigoted, or that we are homophobic. Yet, our desire, here, on FamilyLife Today is to talk openly about what the Bible has to say about issues related to marriage and family—

23:00

—issues related to gender/sexuality—that’s all tied up in how God brings us together in a marriage and a family relationship.

And we’re so grateful that many of you are, not just listeners to this program, but you are friends of FamilyLife, who support the ministry with your prayers and with your financial contributions. If you’d like to help with a donation today to support this ministry, go online at FamilyLifeToday.com. Click the link in the upper right-hand corner of the screen that says, “I CARE,” and you can make an online donation there. Or call 1-800-FL-TODAY. Make a donation over the phone. Or you can write to us—mail a donation to FamilyLife Today at PO Box 7111, Little Rock, AR; and our zip code is 72223. By the way, we love to get stories of how God is using the ministry of FamilyLife Today in your life. So, if you can share one of those stories with us—that would be a great encouragement to us as well.

24:00

Now, tomorrow, we’re going to hear about how Rosaria Butterfield found herself sitting one morning in the pews at a Presbyterian church in Syracuse, New York—the last place she thought she’d ever be—and we’ll hear how God met her in that pew. I hope you can tune in for that.

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 next time for another edition of FamilyLife Today.

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