

Should We Try A New Starting Point?

In the previous article, we observed that most people we see on a daily basis seem to have no urgent motivation to consider faith and there's little indication their interest will change anytime soon. For this reason, we emphasized that one of the major tasks of Christians living in post-Christian contexts is to sift through the rubble of discarded beliefs in order to uncover starting points for helping people engage with the gospel message.

However, finding such 'jumping off' points in everyday relationships and interactions poses significant challenges.

(Interviewer)

"Has there ever been a moment where you have had a question about your own faith, where you're like: 'if God was here face to face with me right now this is what I'd want to ask you?'"

(Young Person)

"No, I don't think so."

No Questions Asked: The Findings From a Qualitative Study of 16-19 Year-Olds in Luton, The Youthscape Centre for Research, 2016, p.14

In our experience, the relevancy barrier is one of the most significant obstacles

keeping those in our everyday lives from pursuing any kind of faith or belief.

This is true amongst the youth we have worked with in the United Kingdom:

"This is a generation that is neutral on matters of faith, they are not anti-God nor against spirituality. However, for many, unless there is a crisis, or they are raised in a Christian home or they have friends who are Christians who talk about their beliefs, then faith isn't on the agenda."

- Neil O'Boyle Youth for Christ UK
National Director YFC Z → A p.40

And the situation seems similar across the Atlantic in the United States:

"For most teens, religion is taken as part of the furniture of their lives, not a big deal, just taken for granted as fine the way it is. Most teens seemed content to live with a low visibility religion that operates somewhere in the mental background of their lives."

-Smith, C. And M.L. Denton,
Soul Searching: The religious and spiritual lives of American teenagers. 2005,

Oxford: Oxford University Press. pp.122, 137

The current climate seems to have taken many Christians literally 'out of commission'. The Church and its people lack confidence and have little idea where to begin when it comes to engaging with their friends, family, co-workers, neighbours and classmates. Ironically, this is occurring during in the midst of an era when Christians have access to an endless range of excellent books, dynamic programmes and engaging courses that can assist and equip us with our evangelistic efforts.

Where can those of us who still possess the motivation to talk about Jesus find hope and recover our expectation for engaging effectively with others in this age of unbelief? Is it even possible to awaken interest in the face of such an apathetic population?

In short, where should we start?

A New Starting Point Involves:

- Understanding the questions people today are asking vs. the questions I think or want them to ask
- Understanding people evaluate truth based on experience vs. logical proofs
- Understanding the key to unlocking curiosity lies in stirring up internal longings vs. presenting external Information

Understand the Questions People Today Are Asking

Sparking new hope and discovering new pathways forward starts by brushing away the 'cultural dust' of spiritual

disinterest in order to uncover the kinds of questions people today *are* asking.

"Back in the eighteenth century, it was important to show that Christianity was true; in the twenty-first century, it has become important to show that it works."

-Alister McGrath, Narrative Apologetics, p.17

Rather than scepticism regarding the existence of God, the reliability of Scripture or the credibility of the gospel accounts of Jesus, the questions people today ask are extraordinarily practical. These questions sound like, "So What?" "Why even think about God in the first place?" Or, "How could believing in a God help my life?"

These are questions concerning the *relevance* of faith and belief rather than questions about soundness or truthfulness.

"The evidence^A postmoderns will respond to is evidence of the attractiveness and relevance, harmony and utility of conviction. Once this evidence is demonstrated, more logical proof will be compelling. But until the evidence for the attractiveness and relevance of Christian faith has been presented,

logical proofs will make little impact.”

-Rick Richardson, *Evangelism Outside the Box*, p.97

We have been sharing – through our articles and social media posts - several examples from our own experience that seem to support what scholars and practitioners have been telling us and confirm that the ‘relevance’ questions hold prominence over any other sorts of questions about faith and belief.

As I mentioned in a previous article, my friend Simon had grown up without any kind of faith but accepted our invitation to join our small group and try reading the Bible. After weeks of struggling to get anything useful out of it, I decided to ask a most basic-level question: “Simon, do you feel like you *need* God?” His reply was, “I don’t think so. I’m not sure how he could make my life better.”

Adam is an example of a teenager I had the opportunity to share my faith story with. His response after listening politely was simply, “I’m happy you have faith. But I don’t really see the point of it for myself.”

In addition to these friends who either possess no interest in God or who feel they don’t need God, we’ve had friends actually plead with us, “I just wish you could believe that we can be good without God.” We suspect some of these emotions stem from negative experiences with the Church or Christians in their own past or perhaps from past human history in general. The inference is, “Because of all the evil that’s been done in God’s name, aren’t we as a civilization better off without him?”

Understand People Evaluate Truth Based on Experience rather than Logical Proofs

We know that attempting to establish evidence for our faith or to demonstrate the sound logic of our Christian convictions is a less effective starting point than it once was. Again, these issues are not the main sticking points keeping the average person from thinking about their beliefs.

In the past, during the Age of Enlightenment or Age of Reason, the Church spent a great deal of energy compiling evidence and constructing coherent arguments for its doctrines and beliefs. These efforts helped the Church to meet people ‘where they were at’ as they considered the claims of Christianity in light of other scientific and religious frameworks for belief and meaning.

However, the common person today no longer makes decision about what is true or what carries value primarily by weighing up evidence or by reasoning whether or not the Christian faith makes more sense than other structures for belief – or unbelief.

This could be good news for the majority of Christians who seem to be daunted by the prospect of evangelism, often paralyzed by fear of not being able to provide answers to complex questions. However, are we any better equipped to answer people’s surprisingly *practical* questions? Furthermore, is there a way to address these questions in ways that could actually stimulate an interest in God and encourage those around us to pursue a personal faith of their own?

Paul, in his address to the non-Messiah-seeking citizens and philosophers of Athens, set out from common ground, pointed to clues that God had placed in the cosmos and employed the voice of acceptable authorities within the culture to spur spiritual engagement.

So we wonder, what sort of common ground do we share with the common person in our context? What clues, placed by God, in the cosmos will people in our society consider? What acceptable authorities can stimulate curiosity? And how do citizens in our setting decide what is true?

After even a cursory observation of our culture, it seems resoundingly clear the main authority individuals rely upon for confirmation is... their own individual *self*. There is little surprise on this point. Since time began, our very first ancestors figured they were their own best authority for knowing what was good and right (Genesis 3). However, the *means* by which most people today decide what is true has shifted from times past. **People today decide what is 'true' through experience.**

"There was almost a sense with these young people that unless you experience something, it's not worth debating or questioning; questioning is futile. There was a 'come and see' attitude, as they recognized that unless someone else experienced it for themselves, they would not be convinced by argument. Personal experience therefore constituted the most significant proof, as another person's testimony was not seen as enough. This is nothing new, but highlights the shift in what young people argued as proof; it is less about facts or testimonies or

historical accuracy, but about personal experience i.e. something becoming true for me."

-No Questions Asked: The Findings From a Qualitative Study of 16-19 Year-Olds in Luton, The Youthscape Centre for Research, 2016, p.22

Realising that the people around us decide what is true through experience, rather than through logic or rational thought is an eye-opening revelation for many of us. I still clearly recall the moment the penny dropped for me whilst I was sat in an elective class at seminary. This new awareness seemed to challenge everything I thought I knew about reaching people with the gospel. It was at that point – as a fledgling youth minister – that the following question first started to burn in my heart and mind:

'How can we possibly help young people who are not looking for God and who have no connection with God and no history with the church experience their way into a saving and transforming relationship with God through the person of Jesus?'

Understand the Key to Unlocking Curiosity Lies in Stirring up Internal Longings Rather than Presenting External Information

We have wrestled with this question for over twenty years now in various youth ministry contexts. Relying on oneself and one's own experiences to decide what is true can be fraught with peril – particularly in light of the reality that 'our minds are clouded and our hearts are darkened' (Romans 1.21). Nevertheless, like Paul, we have perceived several ways of employing this 'acceptable authority' to spark a spiritual journey. And it has driven us to develop several new approaches that seek to awaken curiosity and draw teenagers along on the path of faith toward God through Jesus.

Like most journeys, the most crucial step - and perhaps the most challenging - is the initial one. **We have found the most effective first step to help clear the relevancy barrier, to overcome all the reasons *not* to believe, comes when people discover – through experience - they have a soul.**

Perhaps Paul was employing a similar tactic when he encouraged his listeners,

'God is not far from each one of us. For in Him we live, and move and have our being.' (Acts 17.27-28)

At our core, as humans, we are spiritual beings. But this reality is not something the average person is aware of on a daily basis.

So herein lies the starting point.

Learn to Stir

As Christians, we can learn to come alongside people and look out for the everyday emotions, longings and questions that reveal our true nature – the clues God has put in place to lead us to Him. We can point to these realities and perhaps even learn to stir curiosity by leading and inviting people into experiences where they can exercise their atrophied spiritual muscles. Once people experience their true spiritual nature, the relevancy barrier starts to crumble. Beliefs that have been buried and lie dormant under layers of dust start to awaken. Rather than concluding there is no real point to pursuing faith, spiritual experiences give individuals motivation to explore further and to pursue new possibilities.

Of course these are only the beginning, baby steps, if you will. We have highlighted the 'spiritual', but we have not yet spoken of God. We have not called upon anyone to follow Jesus. But let's not underestimate the significance of what *has* occurred. We have helped to stimulate movement in a direction. A friend has now set foot in the 'fitting room' if you will and has started to 'try faith on' for himself. A co-worker has started a journey and she can now receive further guidance and direction.

How can we lead and invite people into experiences that help them to discover they are spiritual? How can we learn to 'stir souls'?

We have been developing and sharing our approaches for 'stirring souls' in several different contexts. We would love to share a few core principles with you. You may even find our Stir Course helpful in a church or youth ministry setting if the people you are building connections with are not yet interested in faith or are not asking questions about Jesus and Christianity. We put a high value on the normal, everyday interactions with our friends, neighbours, co-workers and classmates and want to offer practical help for how to keep conversations going as opposed to giving answers to questions these people are not asking.

We are excited to share what we have developed. But we have so much *more* to understand when it comes to overcoming the relevancy barrier. We desire to continue learning - and maybe even create a few *new* things – together.

Will you continue forward with us as we learn to Stir?