

# When will we talk about Jesus?

In the previous article we learned a few of the key skills of a soul stirrer. We learned how to look out for the everyday emotions and longings within each of us that point towards the presence of the soul and a desire to connect with God. We still have much to learn, however, when it comes to leveraging this newfound spiritual awareness into opportunities to introduce God and the gospel.

*“So when are we going to talk about Jesus?”*

*The question wasn’t completely unexpected. And it was asked with the best of intentions.*

*Our lunchtime group in the local secondary school had run for a few weeks now. A couple dozen teenagers typically piled into our assigned classroom to get a free donut and listen to us talk about faith. The teacher who asked the question wondered when we would get to the point. Knowing that she had been very involved in her Christian Union during university, we sensed that she pictured using a similar approach with our lunchtime crowd, one that involved examining the gospel accounts first-hand and then offering*

*reasoned responses to questions that were raised. Our room full of rowdy teenagers, however, was quite different – in several ways – to the more intellectually oriented students at the Christian Union.*

As we have forged a new starting point amongst a generation who is indifferent to God, we have wrestled over the most appropriate ways to engage in mission to those who have no history with Him or His Church. At times we have resonated with those who suggest:

*“We just need to proclaim the Gospel.”*  
Or, *“We simply need to preach the Word and let the Spirit do the work.”*

On a surface level, it seems like the right thing to do. However, it fails to take into account the other crucial side of the missionary equation; can our audience *truly hear* our message? A missionary would never plan to land on foreign soil, declare the gospel message in his own tongue and then leave feeling satisfied that he had ‘done his job’. Similarly, despite our respect for the street preacher’s *motivation* as he reads out the Bible through a loudspeaker, many of us rightly question the effectiveness of the *method*. Perhaps there is more required of us than simply

‘preaching the message and leaving the results up to God.’

In our experience, the ‘relevancy barrier’ seems the most significant obstacle to initially overcome if we expect people to engage with the gospel. We sense the need to draw attention to this significant barrier, to the kinds of questions people are asking, to the way people decide what is true and to offer practical help for overcoming this preliminary hurdle by stirring spiritual curiosity.

But stirring people to the point of awareness of their true spiritual nature is certainly only the beginning! We do need to ‘talk about Jesus’ and – as one wise friend of ours put it – not be afraid to cross the ‘threshold of pain’ when it comes to talking about our sin problem. So how do we get there?

*“Initial contact with young people counts for little if the relationship does not lead to a place where a community of people can go on a journey of faith discovery together.”*

-Rich Atkinson, “Target” p. 39

### **From Stirring Souls to Encountering a Saviour: The Stir Process Overview**

Although the picture must certainly look different from God’s perspective, We have maintained that evangelism - from our human perspective - is typically a *process* rather than a one-point-in-time encounter. We know the reality is that ‘no one can come to Jesus unless the Father draws him’ (John 6.44). Nonetheless, God calls us to participate *with* Him in that drawing.

Therefore, despite the risk of oversimplifying something as profound as the salvation of a soul, we feel compelled to voice something that is simple and ‘sticky’. We are practitioners at heart. And we have seen many, such as our past youth ministry students, struggle to translate principles into real life practice. So we have found it beneficial to cut a path and leave a few signposts along the way to help point toward the intended destination.

### **We propose the following pathway for addressing the relevancy barrier and drawing people toward the point of a gospel invitation.**

#### **STIR**

Learn to stimulate spiritual curiosity by stirring up dormant thoughts, questions and longings within people that point to the presence of a soul

#### **INTERPRET**

Interpret and affirm these spiritual stirrings and use them as relevant starting points for beginning a journey to God

#### **INTRODUCE**

Introduce people to God, to His Story and to people who claim to know Him and introduce people to Jesus.

#### **INVITE**

Invite people to fully connect into God and His plan by making Jesus their Leader and Forgiver.

## STIR AND INTERPRET

We have spoken at length regarding the early stages of this approach. In summary, we must start by addressing the profound postmodern apologetic question, 'So What? Why be bothered about faith in the first place?' We can attempt to overcome this static state of indifference by STIRRING up the longings of the soul, raising these feelings to the level of consciousness and INTERPRETING them as emanating from our innate spiritual essence.

This stirring generates momentum and gives us opportunity to draw and guide individuals forward so we can INTRODUCE them to the God who loves them and INVITE them to follow Jesus. Let's unpack these two latter stages of our Stir approach in greater detail.

## INTRODUCE

### Introduce God

Drawing people from heightened awareness of their true spiritual nature into a desire to explore further sounds like this, 'It seems you have longings that cannot be filled with the physical things of this world and emotions that reveal a desire to connect with someone or something greater than yourself. I believe this Someone is God. And I would like to INTRODUCE Him to you.'

Much like Paul's missional method in Athens, we can say, 'it's become clear that you are looking for someone or something... may I Introduce Him to you?' (Acts 17)

As we introduce people to God, we have the chance to help answer an additional, and again deceptively basic,

question that our friends, colleagues and schoolmates will ask of any belief system. 'Does it work?' Or, in other words, 'Does it make my life better?'

*"The usual "apologetic" questions don't seem to better these young people or bring them into conversation around God. Instead, they seem to be interested in practical life; where and when they might think of God in relations to events in their life, and the usefulness of God."*

-Lahna Pottle: No Questions Asked: The Findings From a Qualitative Study of 16-19 Year-Olds in Luton,' The Youthscape Centre for Research, 2016, p.11

**When we introduce God, we can demonstrate that it's only in God that we can *truly* 'live and move and have our being' (Acts 17.28). We can show that establishing a connection with God – and living out the Christian faith – culminates in the kind of beauty, satisfaction and purpose that our souls long for. And we can do this in a way that continues to resonate with the way people in our context decide what is true – through experience.**

We can learn to do this in our everyday relationships and we can also use the Stir Course as a way to introduce God more intentionally.

### Introducing God on a Personal Level

There are several ways to introduce God to those we relate to on a regular basis. One way is by recognising the usefulness of sharing not only our

personal testimony or 'Faith Story' that explains how we found forgiveness and put our faith in God, but also the power of sharing our small 's' stories. These small 's' stories are examples of how God is satisfying my needs and filling my longings *today*. And we must learn how to share these stories naturally, in everyday conversation using normal language.

*"Personal narratives of faith are a testimony to the capacity of the Christian Gospel to change people, becoming an important part of their lives, so that an objective truth becomes a subjective reality without losing its objective character. "*

*-Alister McGrath, Narrative Apologetics*

We can also learn to break the 'spiritual sound barrier' and help people experience God directly by offering to pray *for* them, sometimes even right then and there. Always ask permission. Then keep it short and keep it simple and assure that you will not do or say anything weird, or even close your eyes. I've had several opportunities in the dog park or in the coffee shop to say, 'I know you don't believe in God yet, but I do. Can I pray for you?' And then I've asked God to give my friend comfort as he waits for news from his doctor or to give her peace when her difficult family member visits from out of town.

Some of us will have to first ask ourselves whether we believe people can experience God *before* they have fully committed to Him. At times, as spiritual awareness is just starting to stir, a friend of ours has confided, 'I want to know God is 'there' listening,

but I just can't seem to feel that connection.' When that happens, you can be sure the Spirit is working! The relevance of God is no longer an issue. You now have the opportunity to move into the gospel, which by now just might sound like good news.

### **Introducing God Using The Stir Course**

You can also use the Stir Course as a tool to invite people on an intentional spiritual journey. The Stir Course is a series of sessions you or your church can use to invite your friends, neighbours, co-workers or classmates to engage with faith. After an initial set of sessions that will help you 'stir', several sessions will help you introduce God.

Just as Paul pointed back to Creation with his non-Jewish audience, the first 'Introducing God' session begins at the *beginning*, in Genesis 1-3. You will present the first humans who were created by God, connected with God and then subsequently lost that connection because of their sinful choices. Next, similar to Paul's method of using cues from the cultural authorities of his day such as poets and philosophers, you will have access to several contemporary examples of people who claim to be connected with God. You will draw on contemporary examples from film, television, books and news articles and demonstrate how connecting with God brings purpose to life, healing from sickness, friendship in times of loneliness, the ability to forgive in the face of injustice and a healthy self image in times of self doubt.

### **Introduce Jesus**

God did not want us to have to guess at what He is like or have to wonder about

the benefits of a connection with Him. And although He revealed Himself in history through His people and through His recorded Word, His final Word was Jesus. Therefore, the most powerful way to introduce God is by helping people to encounter Jesus. Jesus was God... *with skin on*.

*"The Word became flesh and blood and moved into the neighbourhood."*

-John 1:14 (The Message)

Initially we want to introduce Jesus not as the 'Saviour of our sins' but as someone who was *fully one* with God. We want to show how this full connection with God made a huge positive impact not only on Jesus himself, but the whole world around him. As we help people encounter Jesus, we can help them grow in their understanding that Jesus also *was* God. Then, as they demonstrate a desire to connect *with* God, the fact that Jesus is the only way to God becomes eternally significant.

*"The earliest Christians witness seems to have taken the form of an invitation to "come and see what we have found" (e.g., John 1:45-46), rather than any attempt to conceptualize Jesus's significance and thus proclaim a set of ideas, rather than point to a person".*

-Alister McGrath, Narrative Apologetics

How can we introduce the person of Jesus? Again, we can learn to do this in our everyday relationships and we can also use the Stir course as a way to do this more intentionally.

### **Introducing Jesus on a Personal Level**

Although many barriers regarding the authority and credibility of Scripture exist in our culture, many are still curious about the Bible and we know that God's recorded Word is powerful to stir. So when people like our neighbours and friends are interested in knowing more about Jesus, we have often loaned them a copy of a children's Bible such as, *The Jesus Storybook Bible: Every Story Whispers His Name*. We preface it by saying, 'It may seem like it's childish, but we love it and it gives you a quick overview of the Bible and how Jesus is actually at the centre of all of it. Later we can give you a proper Bible if you are interested in exploring further.'

You can also suggest they read directly from one of the gospels. Alternatively, several compelling films and series depicting the life of Jesus are available to purchase or stream (we suggest avoiding several others that are, admittedly, quite cringey). In either case, read or watch parts of one of these together with a friend or suggest they read or watch it alone and then arrange to meet up for a coffee so you can hear what they may have found captivating.

### **Introducing Jesus Using The Stir Course**

If you use the Stir Course, several sessions will guide you to dive directly into the gospel accounts to help introduce Jesus and his close relationship with God. You will then encourage participants to consider the positive impact this connection with God had on Jesus and on the people around him.

When people encounter Jesus – either through your relationship with them or

by using the Stir Course – they discover that:

- Jesus removed religious barriers that kept people from God
- Jesus cared for people
- Jesus loved outcasts
- Jesus was a good friend
- Jesus didn't care if people said bad things about him because he knew what God said about him
- Jesus stood for what was right and just
- Jesus hugely valued women
- Jesus was powerful he impacted the seen and unseen world around him rather than being negatively affected by it
- Jesus talked to God like He was a loving father.

## Jesus lived the kind of 'full life' we are all longing for! And it is because he was fully one with God.

Incidentally, Jesus' life and his connection with God offers a satisfactory response to an *additional* postmodern query, 'Does this belief lead to relational harmony?'

As people meet the real Jesus, they will be drawn to his life and attracted to him as a person. Often this provides all the necessary incentive to ask, 'Would you like to experience this same kind of life? Do you want to know how *you* can be fully connected with God?'

'Everywhere Jesus went, true life followed'

-Stephen McAlpine *Being the Bad Guys*

## INVITE

In our first article we wondered aloud about whether or not personal sin is the best place to begin gospel conversations. If a person is not interested in knowing God, the fact that sin stands as a barrier between them and God doesn't really cause any bother. However, if spiritual curiosity has been stirred and if a person senses a growing desire to connect with the God their soul longs for, we must be honest and talk about the state of our relationship with God.

It probably shouldn't cause surprise, but our present condition as humans is that we are separated from God because of our own sinful desire for independence. This separation actually makes a lot of sense out of the pain and mess we see when we look at the world... and look at our own world.

Helping individuals grasp – and truly feel- the devastating effects of our sin and separation from God is crucial, not just for correct theological understanding, but because it opens the door for the gospel message to be heard and accepted as Good News rather than seemingly irrelevant information.

Whether you are using the Stir Course or INVITING people to follow Jesus to God in your personal relationships, this stage of the Stir approach is where the majority of evangelism resources and courses begin. So we now have the benefit of following a more familiar track as we guide individuals to grasp the fullness of salvation 'by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone'. It is at this point that we unpack the problem of sin, God's eternal plan to rescue humans, our inability to get back

to God on our own and Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection. We also demonstrate how re-connecting with God involves admitting our guilt and transferring our trust. It is not about asking God to come into 'our heart', but surrendering our lives to God.

also means having patience as we guide people over these hurdles and forward progress is not always easy and not always clear. So let's keep walking together, helping each other and encouraging one another, as we Start to Stir.

As we do this, we can continue to learn how to employ *experiential* versus *informational* approaches. We can help people sense God's deep desire to be in relationship with us, feel the weight of how our independence has separated us from Him and experience brokenness over the ways our sin has hurt ourselves and the people around us (our sin has violated our own 'relational harmony' ethic). We can portray Jesus' crucifixion and, because individuals have already grown attached to Jesus, they may feel a mixture of shock and then gratitude for his sacrifice as opposed to feeling indifferent toward someone they didn't know taking their place for a problem they didn't know they had. We can invite people to confess a few specific sins and experience forgiveness in a way that feels relieving and cleansing rather than praying a 'God forgive me all my sins' prayer that often enables sin to remain an abstract concept. **Finally, we can lead people – using language they are familiar with – to make Jesus their Leader and Forgiver and trust him to bring them back into a full connection with God.**

### **Keep Stirring**

So when we talk about Stir, we *are* going to talk about Jesus! But stirring involves recognizing that the soul must scale significant barriers before discovering a *desire for* God. Stirring