

Why is it so difficult to share faith?

“Can I ask you a question, Simon?”

*“Sure, go ahead” he replied with a grin.
“Ask anything you want.”*

“Do you feel like you need God?”

There it was. After all these weeks, I finally had a chance to put what I saw as the crux of the issue on the table. Simon and I had met through a mutual friend and he actually accepted the invitation to attend a small group and start reading the Bible! But after weeks of polite attempts, it was clear that he wasn't getting much out of it. So I asked to meet up for a coffee.

Fortunately, I could see that Simon wasn't put off by my direct question about his need for God. He took my question seriously and, after a brief pause, he answered in a way that I can still clearly recall to this day.

“This is probably going to sound bad, and probably quite arrogant, but...not really? I mean, maybe this sounds a bit like a business transaction or something, but I would have to see why it would make my life any better.”

It seems many of my attempts to help people engage with the gospel end up in

a similar place as my interactions with Simon. I often pluck up the courage to bring God into my relationships and everyday conversations. **However, even when I choose to be bold, I get the distinct impression that most people are not in any way interested in talking about church or faith and certainly not Jesus.** I'm not saying they are raging atheists or even hugely antagonistic about my Christian faith. It's just they are not really thinking about God or eternity or even their present purpose in this life, at least not on any kind of a surface level. And they don't seem to see any real reason to start.

This often leaves me feeling discouraged. Sometimes I subconsciously ponder whether it's worth trying to raise these topics at all. Perhaps, in this current spiritual climate, my job is to simply 'make it my ambition to lead a quiet life and to mind my own business.' (1 Thessalonians 4.11)

Our Culture Has Drastically Shifted...

If, like me, it often feels as if the people around you have little interest in matters of faith, particularly the Christian faith, you are not alone. Christian leaders, scholars, historians

and practitioners have informed us that in the West (and perhaps other parts of the globe that have been heavily influenced by the Church in the West) we are living in a post-Christian world. This is a simplified way of saying that, whilst the Church was the major cultural influencer for several centuries, it no longer takes centre stage in society. People now have very little knowledge of God and no personal history with Him. People are not looking for God. To most of the people around us, God simply...doesn't exist.

One of the difficulties facing an apologist is that demonstrating the reasonableness or truth of Christianity does not always lead people to embrace it. Something may be true yet possess little, if any, relevance for human existence.

- Alistair McGrath, *Narrative Apologetics*, p.15

Characteristics of a Post-Christian Society

- The Church no longer takes centre stage
- People are generations removed from God and the Church
- People lack familiarity with the Biblical story

In the past, the average person possessed a familiarity with the main stories of the Bible and held an awareness of God's standards for humanity. That's why it made a good deal of sense that our approach to evangelism focused mainly on challenging people to apply these familiar truths to their own lives; to take knowledge *about* God and translate it into personal surrender *to* God.

However, since there is 'no residue of the Jesus story' left in our culture today, it seems clueless at best - and cruel at worst - to invite people to make Jesus their 'Lord and Savior' and then walk away as if we have done our duty even if the other person displayed no real interest or understanding.

...But Our Methods Have Not

Even though so much has shifted, it seems not enough has changed on a practical level when it comes to mission and evangelism.

Our method for personal evangelism largely consists of trying to live our lives as 'nice people' and hoping that someday people will notice our faith and ask us about it. The Church's methods for evangelism continue to rely heavily on the expectation that people possess active questions about God, life, Jesus and the Bible and will show up in our spaces so we can help them make sense of it all.

"Last year we led a weekly 'chapel' as part of our drop-in which included prayer, worship and Bible teaching. No matter how 'youth friendly' we made the content, or how new the songs were, the group were disengaged, and as a team we realized that this was because

deep down, they weren't curious about the Christian story."

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

Sure, we all know exceptions to the above. There are parts of the world where people from the community *do* attend church when services and programs are compelling and the message is spoken clearly. And in the other parts of the world where people are not showing up in this same way, the Spirit is still working. In either case, individuals continue to come to faith as God is *still* building His Kingdom in a society that, by and large, is not looking for Him. However, it seems to be occurring less frequently.

Common Pitfalls When Sharing Faith in a Post-Christian Culture

- Challenging people to commit to Someone or something they know nothing about
- Living like a nice person and anticipating that people will ask what makes you different
- Expecting the average person to have active questions about God or faith that they just can't wait to ask

We Need a New Approach

It seems we need a new approach. An approach that considers where people today are starting from in their awareness of God and an approach that

acknowledges that those around us are not so much actively against God, they've just never *really* met Him.

But before we unpack an alternative way of going about evangelism, it does need to be said that certainly many things *cannot* change and should not change.

Even the most well-intentioned approach, born out of a rigorous reading of the gospel and the culture into which we hope to plant it, is not capable of bringing about faith on its own power. We must heed the words of Jesus and rely on God and His Spirit to draw people to Himself.

"No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him."

-Jesus (John 6.44 - NIV)

And although a relationship with a real live Christian is still the most effective approach to introducing a person to God through Jesus, we must reach out as Christ's body, not as loners struggling to survive and trying to advance alone on the front lines. Despite the reality that the church is statistically in decline in many parts of the West, Jesus has promised to *'build his church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it'* (Matthew 16.18). The Church has always been God's 'evangelism strategy' to reach the world. Furthermore, no matter what approach we take, we cannot avoid difficult truths such as self-gratification, pride, anger, consumerism and hunger for power and control. The reality is that – because of sinful independence - the human mind is clouded and the human heart is darkened. Much of the apathy and suppression of spiritual curiosity today can be traced back to these sad choices.

“For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened.”

-Romans 1:21 (NIV)

So it seems clear that when presenting our faith, many truths remain constant. However, in light of our current climate, it's a good time to pause and re-examine our starting point. We may need to consider whether or not personal sin against God is the best place to begin. Many Christians feel that we must 'warn people they are on a sinking ship before they will reach out and grab the life preserver.' But does this approach demonstrate an awareness of the surrounding spiritual temperature? If most people fail to see the point of God in the first place, the fact that sin stands between them and God does not really bother them.

Start by Addressing the Relevancy Barrier

We refer to the lack of interest in the Christian faith as the 'relevancy barrier'. It's the one that sounds like, "I just cannot be bothered" or "I don't see the point" when a person is presented with opportunities to talk about faith or to ask questions about God and Christianity.

“For many young people today, religion is an insufficient source and mode of belief and

belonging. The question for them is not so much ‘does God exist?’, but ‘why would it matter?’”

-Abby Day, *Believing in Belonging, Culture and Religion* 2009)

It's true that several other barriers to the gospel still exist. Many individuals in our everyday lives do continue to have *intellectual* objections to the claims of the Gospel and to the teachings of Scripture. (Though it interests me how often it seems these intellectual objections are underpinned by negative experiences and emotions from the past – often with the Church or 'Christians'.)

Furthermore, there is certainly growing animosity towards the Church and towards Christianity when it comes to lifestyle choices and differences in beliefs and values surrounding gender and sexual identity issues. And these are real challenges in which we must learn to engage wisely.

Gifted leaders and authors have written and taught extensively about these significant barriers and continue to do so. We want to continue learning from them so that we can be true to God's ways and also more effective in engaging our culture. But after twenty years of working with youth, **we believe this relevancy barrier is one of the most significant obstacles keeping people from faith in Jesus today** and we want to be a voice that calls attention to it.

Will You Join Our Conversation?

We desire to lead a conversation that will help us understand this relevancy barrier at a deeper level and we want to share some of what we have developed to help overcome it from the outset.

In many ways the task before us is identical to that of any missionary who carefully observes the underlying beliefs and practices of his or her culture in hopes of finding inroads for the gospel message. Thankfully, we are not the first to assume this role as many past and present missionaries have gone before us.

When the Apostle Paul engaged in mission to the citizens and philosophers in Athens, he modelled this flawlessly. He noticed this people group believed in multiple gods and even displayed a statue to 'an unknown god', just to cover their bases. He used this observation as a jumping off point in which to engage in an ongoing dialogue about the true God, eternity and Jesus. (Acts 17.16-34)

When we take a closer look, we learn that Paul began by complimenting the crowd, then found common ground, focused on Creation rather than Redemption through Jesus, and pointed to clues that God had placed in the cosmos that could stimulate curiosity. Paul also used the Athenians' own cultural authorities – their poets – to make a case for the living and true God.

"For in him, we live and move and have our being. As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring.'"

- Paul (Acts 17.28 NIV)

There is much we can glean from Paul's approach with this non-Jewish audience in Athens. It must be noted, however, that our situation seems unique and our context may prove to be even more challenging. People in our culture seem to have *no* beliefs. It's as if we have thrown all of our gods into the rubbish bin. Therefore, in order to 'read' our culture, **we must now wade into the rubble of discarded beliefs and sift through the dust of apathetic atheism in order to uncover a starting point of our own by which to point people toward the living God.** We must also grow more aware of the clues in our own culture and its accepted authorities and grow more comfortable in letting them reveal what they know - no matter how deeply it may be buried - to be true about our spiritual nature.

We wonder if you experience this same relevancy barrier as you attempt to share the gospel. If you do, and you would like to better understand where people in our culture are starting from when it comes to faith and also consider new approaches that address their disinterest from the outset, we invite you to join us.

Together we will learn to pick up the broken pieces, brush away the dust and stimulate curiosity about God. Join us and Start to Stir.