

WWSE: "HEART'S BURNING"

MALAYSIA, OCTOBER 2009

TO

THE MOST HIGH
AND MIGHTY PRINCE,
JAMES

By the grace of God, King of great BRITAIN,

FRANCE, and IRELAND,

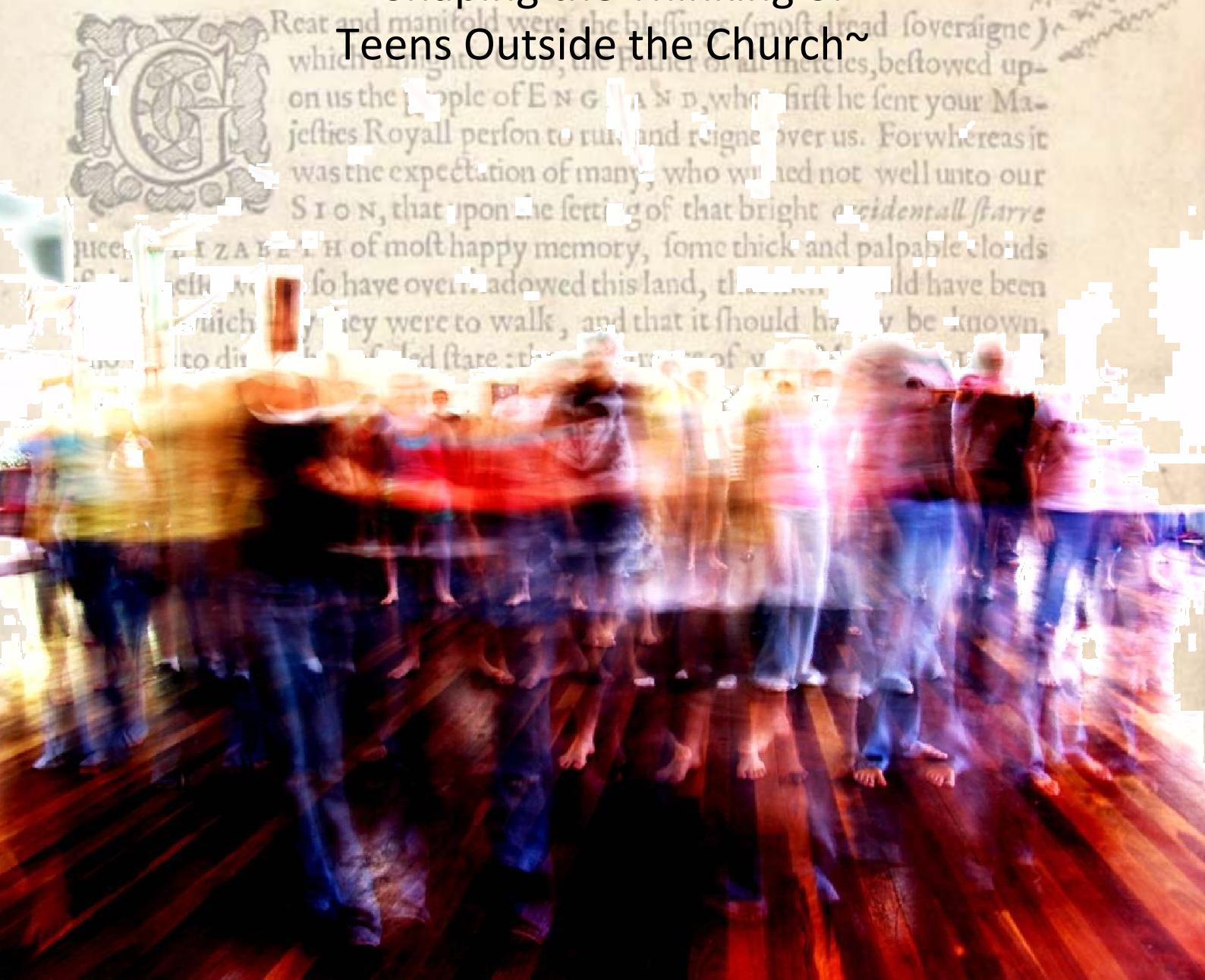
Defender of the Faith, &c.

THE TRANSLATORS OF THE

Bible, with Grace, Mercy, and Peace, through

JESUS CHRIST our Lord.

~Shaping the Thinking of
Teens Outside the Church~



WHAT'S THE BIBLE GOT TO DO WITH ME?

~SHAPING THE THINKING OF TEENS OUTSIDE THE CHURCH~

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Synopsis:

Encountering God's Word has the potential to transform adolescent outsiders. But what if their attitude to the Bible closes their ears? How can we open ears, establish trust, and arouse interest? Sometimes we need to talk about the Bible before we can invite teens to read it. This workshop unpacks a pre-evangelistic conversational strategy that challenges, informs, and inspires teens to see the Bible as plausible, credible, and relevant.¹

Overview:

- [1] Welcome and Ice Breaker—adopt an identity (11:45-11:55)
- [2] The story thus far—case studies and contextualization (11:55-12:10)
- [3] “Where are you?”—the strategy of “triangulation” made concrete (12:10-12:20)
- [4] Opening ears—challenging opposing presuppositions to demonstrate that the Bible is plausible (12:20-12:30)
- [5] Establishing trust—informing adolescents to demonstrate that the Bible is credible (12:30-12:40)
- [6] Arousing interest—inspiring adolescents to demonstrate that the Bible is relevant (12:40-12:50)
- [7] Putting it all together—addressing groups and marshalling resources (12:50-12:55)
- [8] Questions and Further Discussion (12:55-1:00)

¹ This workshop unpacks the approach I employed in my MCS Thesis, “The Thinking Teen: An Exploration, Evaluation and Application of Three Apologetic Strategies in Commending the Bible to Contemporary Western Adolescents,” Regent College, 2009. You can download a hyperlinked version of the thesis from www.mediafire.com/?cnnnujmzilw, and access the background research from www.mediafire.com/?sharekey=66cd49048597e1bdd5a101cf914073b4a3e59df8ada65bc6.

Content and Activities:

- ⌚ Listen to input from the front
- ﴿ Engage in an activity
- 🗣 Share your thoughts in a small group
- 🗣 Share your thoughts as a whole group



[1] Welcome and Ice Breaker—adopt an identity (11:45-11:55)

⌚ Welcome to this workshop. My name is Dave Benson, and I'll be your facilitator. A few quick details about myself: currently I work for Kenmore Baptist Church in Brisbane, Australia, as Pastor of Evangelism and Community Outreach. That means my job is to find creative ways to get growing numbers of Aussies who are post-Christian in attitude, but pre-Christian in understanding, to give Jesus a second look. Prior to this, I've been a science and physical education high school teacher, then a youth worker and youth pastor, before completing a Master of Christian Studies in Vancouver, Canada, at Regent College.

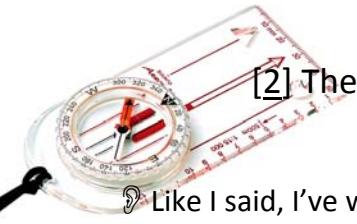
The focus for this session is on shaping the thinking of teens outside the church—the group I'll refer to as “adolescent outsiders.” This is no easy challenge, and I'm sure you are all familiar with some of the attitudes teens have toward the Bible. So as a way of getting to know each other and launching into this session, I want to get you back into the mind of everyday teens!

﴿ I want you to picture a teen you know who isn't a Christian. How do they move? What do they talk like? But more importantly, what do they think about the Bible? In the next 5 minutes I want you each to introduce yourself by your true name and country to one other person. After this point, one person in each pair will take on their chosen teen's identity and complete the sentence: “I think that the Bible is” Your partner has just two minutes to draw out your attitudes and thoughts regarding the Bible, before you swap roles and repeat.

⌚ We have a huge range of countries represented in this workshop—so many different contexts. Perhaps you've picked up on that already. The kind of thinking and attitudes you expressed about the Bible may be brand new to your dialogue partner. But what I'm hoping to bring you today is a model for engaging adolescent outsiders that can work cross culturally.²

If you've worked with teens for long, then you'll know that many adolescent outsiders—at least in the western world—are resistant to joining Christian groups, or directly engaging the Bible. We want to get them into the Word as quick as we can, as it can transform their lives—through it they can encounter God. But what if their attitude to the Bible closes their ears? **Sometimes we need to talk about the Bible before we can invite teens to read it.** But what to say? And how can we most effectively dialogue with teens so that they may open up and give the Bible a fair hearing by reading it for themselves? And who are these teens, anyway? Let me introduce you to three of them.

² Whilst my sociological research was confined to the western context, the psychological frameworks I built this model around—primarily those of Jean Piaget, James Marcia, David Elkind, Lawrence Kohlberg, Carol Gilligan, and James Fowler—are developmental in nature, and have been confirmed cross-culturally. (See Jack Snowman and Robert Biehler, *Psychology Applied to Teaching*, 11th ed., [Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2006], 35.) Our predisposition to more heavily weight beliefs that are plausible, credible, and relevant, is arguably universal anthropologically, and not particularly western, even as our worldview presuppositions may differently determine what is logical, trustworthy, and livable.



[2] The story thus far—case studies and contextualization (11:50-12:10)

Like I said, I've worked with youth for quite some time. And there's nothing I enjoy more than cutting through the façade and finding what teens really think about life's biggest questions: How did we get here? What's the meaning of life? How can we tell right from wrong? And what happens when we die? The teenage years are a key time for identity formation, so these kinds of questions occupy their thinking more than at almost any other period in life.³ They're working out who they are. And to do this, they need to work out the kind of big story—or metanarrative—that they are acting in.

So, I build relationships, and I ask questions. And once they know I genuinely care and will stick by them no matter what, they feel free to be honest. Three teens come to mind: Mitch, Cheyenne, and Fran.

Mitch—the antagonistic atheist:

At one time Mitch believed in God. Not now. Mitch wants to be an engineer, or maybe a psychiatrist, and he is an avid reader even at the age of 17. Through senior physics and biology, Mitch is convinced that science yields the only sure knowledge. Furthermore, his own reading of popular psychology magazines convinces him that much of what we think is conditioned. When it comes to God, we're prone to accepting whatever fulfills our wishes, even when there is no evidence to support such beliefs. Quoting Mitch, "Science seems to indicate that the entire universe is the closed interaction of chemical and physical events, so what meaning can we possibly derive from it? Furthermore, if natural processes explain everything, they must explain human behaviour." So Mitch is making his own meaning independent of God. In Mitch's thinking, natural laws make miracles impossible. As such, he automatically dismisses the Bible as implausible—the product of a naïve and unscientific age—especially the creation myth in Genesis and resurrection claims for Jesus. Science is about facts; the Bible is about faith. Mitch has made his choice and has closed his ears to the unbelievable Word of God.

Cheyenne—the untrusting skeptic:

I met Cheyenne at a talk I gave to year 11 students on what makes for a believable belief. Cheyenne's sister became a Christian a couple of years back, and this seems to have brought her peace. But she has too many unanswered questions, and is unwilling to believe something just because it might make you feel better. The talk we gave was the first time Cheyenne had ever heard someone make a case for believing in Christianity beyond just telling them it will change their life. So she talks to me afterwards, and shares how she finds it difficult to believe, and even harder to trust that any of what we said is true. She's also turned off by the Bible's restrictive morality, which some judgmental Christians at her school are happy to force onto her. She agrees to email me some of her questions. Here's a taste: "I don't understand how Adam and Eve, the first two people, had sex, and had kids who had sex with each other to create all of us today. Doesn't that mean they were incestuous? Isn't that a sin? ... And I don't understand how the death of one man (Jesus) can counteract all of these millions of sins committed then, now, and tomorrow. Sure, Jesus probably lived. But really, how can we believe these stories of coming back from the dead from YEAAAARS and years ago. We never saw him ... so there isn't much to make of him if I don't trust that those things ever happened. It seems to me like you're putting a lot of trust in something that could be just made up. ... How am I supposed to know the Bible is real? You spoke of prophecies, but where did the prophecies come from? How do we know it's not just someone making it up for a laugh, or some evil force? Sorry if this sounds harsh or rude, but it's how I am thinking right now and I don't know any better." Cheyenne finds the Bible literally in-credible, and she's asking for evidence.

³ See, for instance, Michael Mason, Andrew Singleton, and Ruth Webber, *The Spirit of Generation Y: Young People's Spirituality in a Changing Australia* (Mulgrave, Australia: John Garratt Publishing, 2007), 167-170; also Philip J. Hughes, *Putting Life Together: Findings from Australian Youth Spirituality Research* (Fairfield, Australia: Fairfield Press, 2007), 134.

Fran—the confused seeker:

I first met Fran, a recent school graduate, when she hand delivered a letter she wrote to my church. Being part of the church, I figured I was as good a person as any to open it up! The letter began like this: "Dear someone who cares (hopefully!) . . ." She then proceeds to share how she was brought up in the church but fell away as a fifteen year old as she mixed with the wrong crowd, and stopped attending. She started to notice all the different religions and variety of beliefs, undermining her confidence that any one option is right. In her words, "How is it that so many people around the world can feel confident that their 'God' exists and is the only 'God,' when clearly not everyone can be right?" But in the last couple of years she's had some close family members die, and she feels desperately alone and afraid. She's experimented with some alternative spirituality, but her underlying anxiety remains and it all seems empty. So, she tells me that "it is these concerns that brought me to your church, hoping that maybe someday I'll be convinced that it is true. But I'm scared to fall into the trap of believing in a lie just because I'm desperate for it to be true. . . I know how to convince people to believe or think certain things through language, from assignments I did at school. Everyday we see people manipulated by the media into only seeing a certain point of view. So I'm unwilling to open myself up in case I'm sucked into committing my faith like I did when I was twelve, only to find later on that I'm not so sure. You are probably thinking that with my attitude, there is nothing you can do to help, but if by any chance that isn't the case, please give me a call. Thanks for your time, Francesca." Fran is seeking, but she's confused. She desperately wants to believe, to feel peace, to feel hope, to have a purpose. But, Christianity looks to her like a cult blindly trusting in an old book, just because "the Bible says." She's looking for a foundation to justify taking a leap of faith to believe in something real that works.

How do we reach these kinds of teens? Are the strategies you're pursuing helpful for their struggles? I'll come back to Mitch, Cheyenne, and Fran later. But for now we need to step back and see the big picture. To effectively engage with a teen, we need to know where the individual is coming from. But we also need to know the lay of the cultural landscape—the wider forces that have shaped their thinking. *Our efforts to contextualize Bible engagement are only as good as our understanding of the target audience.* We need a kind of map to plot where an individual teen is within the wider culture.

Each culture we come from will have its own unique aspects. But in an increasingly globalized world, there is great overlap. The media creates, and reflects, culture—and this is perhaps best seen in advertising geared toward youth. So, to help us get a feel for the cultural landscape, I want us to do a very brief activity. Form pairs or threes, and come up the front here to grab an ad. As a group you only have 3 minutes to discuss (a) **What does this ad say about youth culture?; and (b) How does this aspect of youth culture affect an adolescent's attitude to the Bible? Selected groups will then take 30 seconds to share what they found.**

We don't have the time in this session to explore the major forces shaping the attitudes of adolescent outsiders—forces like pluralism, postmodernism, secularism, consumerism, and widespread fragmentation and fragility. For that, you can check out my thesis. But here's where the problem started for me. You see, **what I was hearing from most of the leading youth writers didn't adequately explain the kind of real conversations I was having with everyday teens**—like with Mitch, Cheyenne, and Fran—and **nor did it match what I learned in educational psychology on adolescent development.**

According to most commentators, youth today see the world with "postmodern eyes." Tony Jones tells the story well in his book, *Postmodern Youth Ministry*: since about 1980 we have moved from the modern to the postmodern era, changing all our credos: "Objectivity is out, subjectivity is in," "question everything," "there is no Truth with a capital 'T,'" "tell stories," and "never make lists!" We

have moved from rational to experiential, scientific to spiritual, homogeneous to heterogeneous, exclusive to relative, egocentric to altruistic, individualistic to communal, functional to creative, industrial to environmental, local to global, compartmentalized to holistic, relevant to authentic, and propositional to mystical. Only their “relationality” bridges modern and postmodern youth.

Now if this really *is* where youth are at, then we need to be there with them—to give up our old approaches to commanding the Bible to adolescent outsiders. If all youth are postmodern—morally relativistic and rejecting any truth claims, then why waste your time with talks and explanations. If all youth are on a spiritual pursuit for what makes life “work,” irrespective of whether it is true or not, then commanding the Bible is a matter of experiential journeys into the story of the Bible that draw on music, video, silence, light, darkness, and other stimuli. Scripture speaks for itself. In the words of Mike Yaconelli—former owner of Youth Specialties—“this generation is longing for . . . the shore of mystery. In other words, they’re looking for Jesus. What else do we need to know? . . . It’s not hard to define what youth ministry should look like in the future (which is now). No words. No programs. Future ministry should be characterized by silence, solitude, worship, reading, praying, listening, paying attention, and being.” Youth work legends like Dean Borgman and Walt Mueller declare that “for [contemporary youth] moral authorities have lost their appeal, reason and science their credibility. Logical systems, theological proofs, and legitimate authority no longer count. . . . A pluralistic and secular society is either too busy or disinclined to ask: What is the meaning of life? What is truth?” Apparently youth today use feelings, not reason: “they are not concerned with objective proofs and rational arguments supporting Christianity as a faith system. Instead, they simply want to know that it works. Seeing, not knowing, is believing.” Pollster George Barna is perhaps most outspoken, going well beyond the data when he asserts that youth, as postmoderns, aren’t bothered by contradictions. As such, “effective youth work is not logic based! . . . Devoting precious resources in an attempt to reconcile these competing realities will likely prove to be an exercise in waste.” Experience and emotion are the keys. Those worried by such shifts are admonished: “Get over it.”

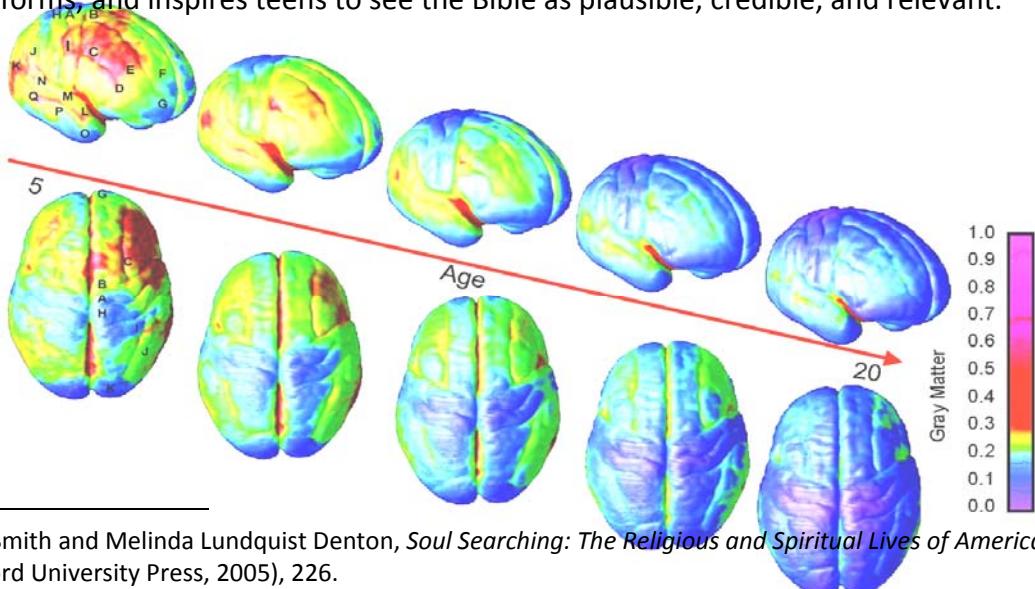
This all sounds exciting and good. It fits with our tendency as youth workers to latch onto the new thing as “everything must change.” But what about the kind of everyday teens I was dialoguing with: the antagonistic Mitches, the skeptical Cheyennes, and the searching but confused Frans of the world? Added to my perplexity, I was regularly running apologetics seminars in secular high schools on topics like “what is truth?”, and intelligent design versus naturalistic evolution, and the feedback from students was always positive, teachers surprisedly noting how impacted and engaged students were.

This motivated me to complete a Master’s thesis on how best to commend the Bible to adolescent outsiders. Psychologically and sociologically, who are these adolescents that we are trying to reach. And what kind of strategy would it take to shape the attitudes of not just a few, but all adolescents. The more I studied, the clearer it became: there was a radical disconnect between conventional wisdom and the real context of contemporary teens. And this is not good news for either practitioners or adolescent outsiders. If we misunderstand our audience, we are in danger of making the Bible even less plausible and attractive than it already is.

For seculars and antagonistic atheists like Mitch, the Bible simply isn’t plausible with all its miracles and appeal to the supernatural. Mitch’s mind is closed to God existing, let alone speaking, so all our talk of mystery confirms to him that we’re a deluded cult. For skeptics like Cheyenne, she has real and detailed questions that need answering before she’s prepared to take the Scriptures seriously. All the drama and emotion in the world is no substitute for simply addressing her objections, and failure to respond confirms her suspicion that we have nothing meaningful to say except “Just believe!” Even for youth like Fran who are spiritually open and searching for a better way, the Bible has so much cultural baggage—and the church is seen as so corrupted and controlling—that she will be slow to drop her guard to experience God’s Word. She doesn’t want to be manipulated, so she readily deconstructs all we do and say with a hermeneutic of suspicion. In each of these cases *experiencing the Scriptures is necessary but, by itself, insufficient to open up the thinking of teens outside the church.*

To cut a long story short, I researched the best data for a year, and found that these one-dimensional approaches don't cut it. In the words of Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton—compilers of the most comprehensive data to emerge out of America on religious beliefs in the last two decades, "We have observed a noticeable tendency when it comes to . . . youth workers, to overgeneralize, overstate issues, frame situations in alarmist terms, and latch onto simplistic answers to alleged problems. But the fact is that the . . . religious lives of American youth are diverse and complicated. . . . Religious communities should also stop . . . presuming that U.S. teenagers are actively alienated by religion . . . and so need some radically new 'postmodern' type of program or ministry. None of this seems to us to be particularly true."⁴ Their findings were echoed by the foremost researchers in Britain, Canada, and Australia. And not only is an exclusively postmodern approach sociologically problematic, but it is educationally suspect when we consider the psychological context of adolescents. Adolescents are in a critical period of cognitive, social/emotional and moral/faith development, receptive to alternative constructions of reality as in perhaps no other time in life. They are most decidedly *not* born with "postmodern eyes." Rather, they are socialized *into* such a worldview, in tension with their innate tendency toward cognitive coherence and correspondence relative to their experiences. This is *not* to say that "postmodern" and "experiential" approaches are irrelevant—*not at all*. It is merely to say that such strategies may be ineffective with many teens unless they are bolstered by complementary approaches that address the presuppositions, questions, and objections of adolescent outsiders. After all, *our heart can't embrace what our mind rejects as false*.

Rather than spend more time critiquing youth commentators, I want to guide you toward what I believe is a more balanced and effective model of engaging adolescent outsiders, shaping their thinking toward greater openness to the Bible. Interestingly, this model closely parallels how Jesus engaged Cleopas and his friend on the journey to Emmaus. Jesus takes time to journey with them, first listening sensitively to join the dialogue. He then challenges their foundational beliefs before giving evidence to establish his credibility. Finally, Jesus speaks to their deepest desires leaving their hearts burning. In line with this model, this workshop will unpack a pre-evangelistic conversational strategy that challenges, informs, and inspires teens to see the Bible as plausible, credible, and relevant.⁵



⁴ Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 226.

⁵ I recognize that in today's confusing times, people are often concerned with experience before explanation, belonging before believing, and image before word. Thus, friendship and love, alongside a consistent Christian witness, is crucial as the broader context within which any meaningful conversation is conducted. Furthermore, I acknowledge in this media age of excessive and empty talk that "corollary apologetics" such as impressive art, piercing poetry, power encounters in the Spirit, engagement in justice and charity, and experience of a caring Christian community provide the "plausibility structures" within which the Bible may be accepted by an unbeliever as inspired and authoritative in his or her life (see John G. Stackhouse, *Humble Apologetics*, 2002, pp. 193 and 206-26). An effective apologetic must be holistic, seeking to "engage the mind, enchant the emotions, empower the will, and restore relationships" (see Burson and Walls, *C. S. Lewis & Francis Schaeffer*, 1998, p. 252). Nevertheless, my particular focus is on what dialogue may take place in commanding the Bible to teens, whether within or outside this preferred context, as questions inevitably arise.



[3] “Where are you?”—the strategy of “triangulation” made concrete (12:10-12:20)

Now that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about *seven miles* from Jerusalem. They were talking with each other about everything that had happened.

As they talked and discussed these things with each other, Jesus himself came up and walked along with them, but they were kept from recognizing him.

He asked them, “*What are you discussing together as you walk along?*” (Luke 24:13-17)

So, how should we engage diverse teens in a pluralistic world, each coming from different angles to the Bible? Perhaps this activity and analogy will help you visualize the strategy I’m suggesting, called “triangulation.” Before you is a white sheet strung over some objects, symbolizing the Malaysian jungle and mountains. Imagine that you are part of a rescue crew searching for a teen reported as lost in the jungle (the bull-clip represents the teen). You know the general lay of the land, and you have a map and a mobile phone to contact this teen. But you don’t know where in particular they’re coming from. What would you do to set about rescuing this teen? Talk this through as a group. (Then afterwards, compare to the approach I’ve suggested below).

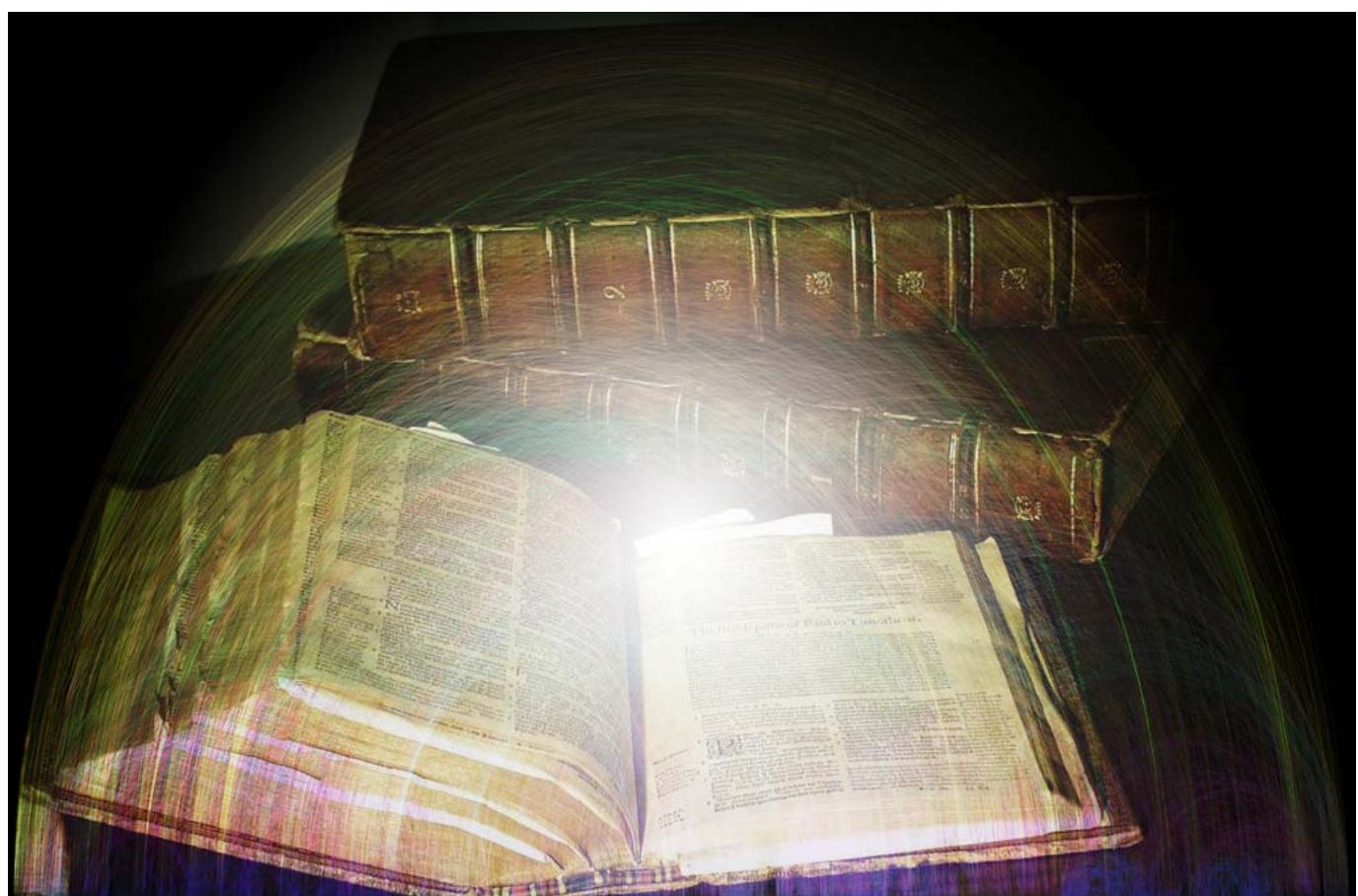
I’d start by asking the teen to describe where she has walked and what she presently sees. She might speak of memorable creeks and mountains she passed along the way, though her present perspective is of nondescript trees and undulating hills. So, I’d encourage her to move toward higher ground—whether by inspiring, informing, or challenging her (especially if she doesn’t think she is lost!), it doesn’t especially matter at this stage. As the dialogue continues and she moves upward, the obstacles obscuring her vision diminish. She now responds to my questions from a distinctive vantage point, helping me orient the map to her descriptions—a knoll here and a valley there. At this point my increasingly specific questions help me to locate her basic position relative to the three most distinct surrounding features separated by the greatest angle. Using these rough angles I can now plot three intersecting lines as “back-bearings” on my map which effectively *triangulate* where the teen is. I can now more directly approach the teen from the direction of the nearest feature—though always with the other two features in view.

How does this relate to our attempts to shape the thinking of teens toward the Bible? In my thesis I explored and analysed the works of **Francis Schaeffer, Lee Strobel, and Rob Bell in relation to the psychological and sociological setting of today's teens**. I chose Schaeffer, Strobel, and Bell, because they represent three distinct voices commanding the Bible in the marketplace of ideas. And I found that each had a lot to offer for how we approach adolescent outsiders today.

In short, they suggest **three distinct angles on commending the inspiration and authority of the Scriptures to a diverse adolescent audience**. Francis Schaeffer's approach equips apologists to open ears by undermining secularism, thereby challenging teens to read the Bible as a plausible worldview. Lee Strobel's approach equips apologists to establish trust through advancing credible truths, thereby informing teens to read the Bible as a reliable account. Rob Bell's approach equips apologists to arouse interest by engaging experience, thereby inspiring teens to read the Bible as a relevant story.

Each adolescent—whether consciously or subconsciously—is judging the **plausibility, credibility, and relevance of the Bible**, which in turn shapes his or her attitude to, and likelihood of, engaging the Scriptures. Yet, each individual will tend to have *one* primary concern—be it **logic, evidence, or experience**—and **insightful questions in the context of authentic dialogue can bring this out** so we can approach them primarily from this direction. Each question asks teens to take a step at the edge of their latitude of commitment toward talking about, then considering, and finally reading the Bible for themselves. In essence, then, this is my framework of **apologetic triangulation**.

My sense is that this strategy effectively facilitates the thinking of teens toward embracing the inspiration and authority of Scripture as it ***opens ears by undermining secularism, establishes trust through advancing credible truths, and arouses interest by engaging experience***. In light of the psychosocial context of today's teens, each element is necessary in reaching diverse youth. As such, empowered by the Spirit, we can expect teens to move *toward* embracing the Bible as the Word of God.





[4] Opening ears by undermining secularism—challenging opposing presuppositions to demonstrate that the Bible is plausible (12:20-12:30)

Jesus asked them, "What are you discussing together as you walk along?"

They stood still, their faces downcast.

One of them, named Cleopas, asked him, "Are you only a visitor to Jerusalem and do not know the things that have happened there in these days?"

"What things?" he asked.

"About Jesus of Nazareth," they replied. "He was a prophet, powerful in word and deed before God and all the people. The chief priests and our rulers handed him over to be sentenced to death, and they crucified him; but we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel. And what is more, it is the third day since all this took place. In addition, some of our women amazed us. They went to the tomb early this morning but didn't find his body. They came and told us that they had seen a vision of angels, who said he was alive. Then some of our companions went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but him they did not see."

He said to them, "How foolish you are, and how slow to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Messiah have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?" (Luke 24:17-26)

⌚ What is Francis Schaeffer's strategy for engaging an antagonistic atheist like Mitch?

Schaeffer addresses outsiders who reject the Bible because of their naturalistic and impersonal presuppositions which render revelation implausible. As such, he seeks to *open ears* by exposing the illogicality and unlivability of his interlocutor's presuppositions. He then argues for the superiority of the Biblical system in answering our metaphysical, moral, and epistemological questions in a coherent manner, verified by what we know of the universe and our human nature.

Schaeffer's approach helps us open adolescent ears to the Bible by undermining secularism. It is especially effective with **antagonistic atheists and uninterested agnostics and deists** who have *a priori* rejected the possibility of an inspired revelation. Its primary function is to **challenge teens** by revealing weaknesses in their foundational presuppositions and inconsistency between what they profess and how they live. Exposing these disparities undermines their confidence, affording new openness to considering the Bible as a plausible system of answers to the big questions with which they grapple.

In short, this approach challenges teens to read the Bible as a **plausible worldview**.

👉 For your context, what kind of attitudes and thinking must we challenge to commend the Bible as plausible?

► *What kind of questions could you ask that shake a teen's foundations by undermining secular presuppositions, so that they might have open ears to God's Word?*

✍ Engage in a brief role play, in which the facilitator will play the role of an *antagonistic atheist* expressing his views on the Bible. As a group, use the questions you formulated to gently *challenge my beliefs*, seeking to *shape my attitude toward openness* to engaging the Bible for myself.

Relevant research concerning adolescent attitudes to the Bible in the Western context:

Adolescents are often exciting and unpredictable! They tend to demonstrate a fascination with events that are novel and spectacular. Nevertheless, in the experience of most teens, life itself runs by repeatable natural principles that govern the world. Snakes don't speak, fish don't swallow people alive and spit them out three days later, cities don't crumble when they shout, blind people stay blind, and dead people stay dead. Secular NRIs (those with No Religious Identification) simply discount the Bible's miracles as implausible—creation, healing, resurrection, and so forth—deferring to conventional scientific and historical accounts.⁶ Upward of 60 percent of Australian youth disbelieve most or all of these Biblical stories.⁷ Over 70 percent do not affirm that “The Bible is God’s Word and all it says is true.”⁸ Not surprisingly, then, in Australia 73 percent of Millennials as a whole and 92 percent of NRIs never read the Bible.⁹ In Canada, over twice as many youth read their horoscope (33 percent) as the Bible (13 percent) in a given week.¹⁰ In general, American teens are far more respectful toward the Scriptures. According to Barna (2001), 90 percent consider the Bible a good source for moral guidance, 75 percent believe the miracles in the Bible, and 60 percent of teens affirm total Biblical accuracy. Nevertheless, with only one out of three teens regularly reading the Bible, few really know which morals, miracles and history they are affirming.

⁶ Michael Mason, Andrew Singleton, and Ruth Webber, *The Spirit of Generation Y: Young People's Spirituality in a Changing Australia* (Mulgrave, Australia: John Garratt Publishing, 2007), 81.

⁷ Philip J. Hughes, *Putting Life Together: Findings from Australian Youth Spirituality Research* (Fairfield, Australia: Fairfield Press, 2007), 147–48.

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⁹ Mason and others, 120.

¹⁰ Reginald W. Bibby, *Canada's Teens Today, Yesterday, and Tomorrow* (Toronto: Stoddart, 2001), 124. Similarly for America, see George Barna, *Real Teens: A Contemporary Snapshot of Youth Culture* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 2001), 40.



[5] Establishing trust through advancing credible truths—informing adolescents to demonstrate that the Bible is trustworthy (12:30-12:40)

And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, *he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.* (Luke 24:27)

⌚ **What is Lee Strobel's strategy for engaging an untrusting skeptic like Cheyenne?**

Strobel addresses outsiders who reject the Bible because of skepticism over its claims. As such, he seeks to *establish trust* by cross-examining experts who supply evidence supporting the Bible's historicity, which in turn offers trustworthy testimony to Christ. He then calls his interlocutor to offer an impartial verdict that best fits the facts.

Strobel's approach helps us to establish adolescent trust in the Bible through advancing credible truths. It is especially effective with **skeptical teens** who doubt Jesus' existence and dismiss the Bible as a corrupted collection of fables advocating archaic ethics. Its primary function is to **inform teens** by demonstrating that the Biblical accounts can withstand scrutiny, thereby demonstrating its historical and moral veracity. As their detailed questions are directly answered with novel evidence, youth may decide that the Bible is more trustworthy than their skeptical reconstructions in accounting for all the data, thereby motivating them to read the Biblical account for themselves.

In short, this approach informs teens to read the Bible as a **reliable account**.

👉 **For your context, what kind of genuine questions and objections do teens have that keep them from trusting the Bible?**

👉 **What kind of questions could you ask an adolescent outsider that will help establish trust that the Bible is credible?**

👉 **From conversations you've had with teens, share with the group what is the one piece of most persuasive evidence you've found that convinces teens the Bible is trustworthy.**

② Relevant research concerning adolescent attitudes to the Bible in the Western context:

The Bible is presently an embattled book, as it has been for two centuries or more. Media-savvy scholars announce damaging assessments. Bart Ehrman cautions that “there are more variations among our manuscripts than there are words in the New Testament.”¹¹ The Jesus Seminar—cited nearly every Easter and Christmas by *Newsweek*, *Time*, and the like—claims that only 2 percent of Jesus’ sayings are authentic; the remainder are either dismissed outright (82 percent) or are doubtful (18 percent).¹² Best-selling novels and their screen adaptations have esteemed (though fictional) historians accusing the church of burning earlier gospel accounts that emphasized Jesus’ humanity over his divinity.¹³ Such revisionism is then readily absorbed and espoused by an anti-authoritarian populace as Christianity’s real history.¹⁴ This culture has clearly shaped adolescent attitudes toward the Bible. As mentioned earlier, upward of 60 percent of Australian youth disbelieve most or all of the Biblical stories.¹⁵ Over 70 percent do not affirm that “The Bible is God’s Word and all it says is true.”¹⁶ In the eyes of many youth, a palm reading and a horoscope chart are more credible than the Biblical story.



¹¹ Bart D. Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005), 89-90.

¹² Gregory A. Boyd, *Jesus Under Siege* (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1995), 88; Robert Walter Funk and Roy W. Hoover, *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus: New Translation and Commentary* (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997).

¹³ Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code*, special illustrated edition (New York: Doubleday, 2004), 242.

¹⁴ Dan Kimball, *They Like Jesus but Not the Church: Insights from Emerging Generations* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007), 193.

¹⁵ Hughes, *Putting Life Together*, 147-48.

¹⁶ Ibid.

[6] Arousing interest by engaging experience—inspiring adolescents to demonstrate that the Bible is relevant (12:40-12:50) ... vv. 28-35



As they approached the village to which they were going, Jesus continued on as if he were going farther. But they urged him strongly, "Stay with us, for it is nearly evening; the day is almost over." So he went in to stay with them.

When he was at the table with them, he took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them. Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him, and he disappeared from their sight. They asked each other, "*Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?*" (Luke 24:28-32)

⌚ **What is Rob Bell's strategy for engaging a confused seeker like Fran?**

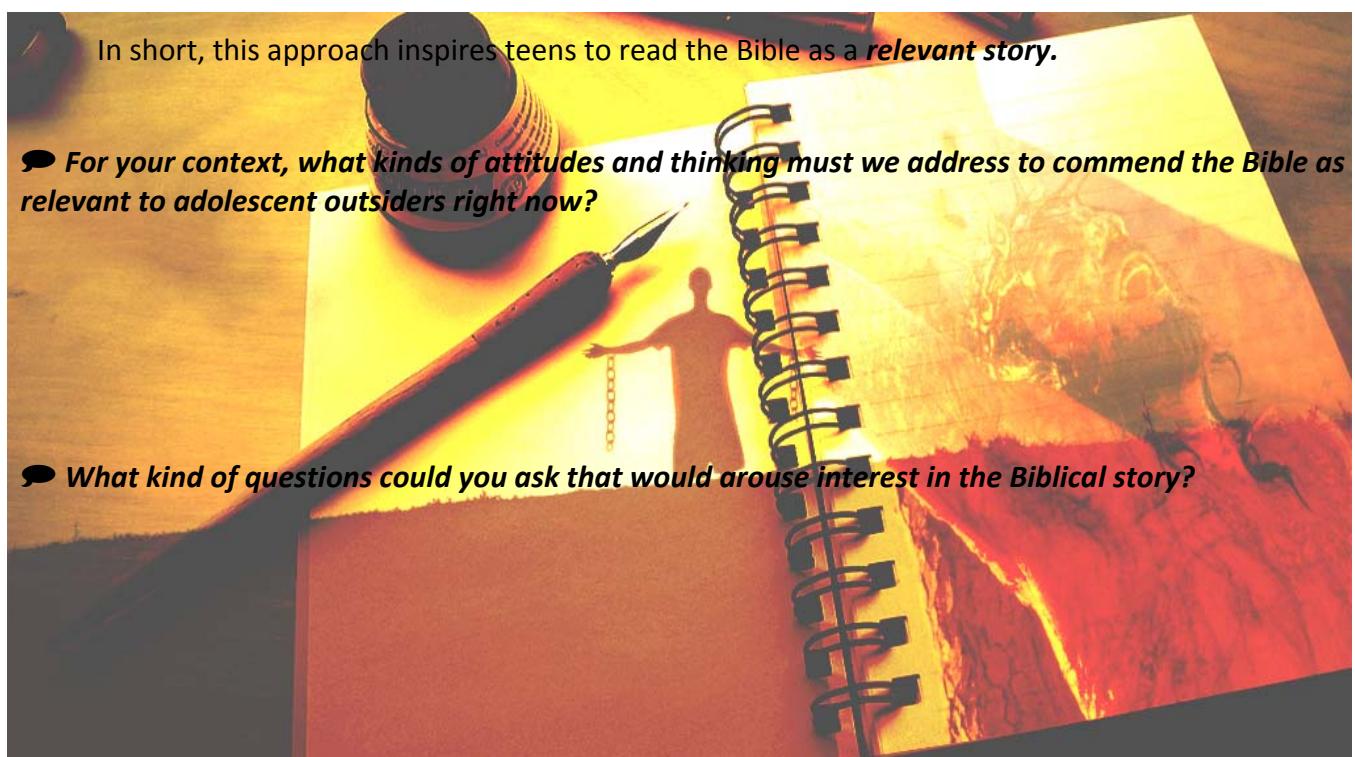
Bell addresses outsiders who reject the Bible because the church and its message seem unrelated to their everyday existence. As such, he seeks to *arouse interest* by tying our stories, and our sense of transcendence in even mundane moments, into the larger Biblical story about the one who is behind it all: Jesus. In response, he invites us to "jump"—to experience the joy of walking Jesus' way.

Bell's approach helps us arouse adolescent interest in the Bible by engaging experience. It is especially effective with **nominal Christians and New Agers** who are open to insights irrespective of source—teen magazines, star charts, song lyrics, the Bible—that excite their imagination, enthrall their emotions, and propel their pursuit of happiness. Its primary function is to **inspire teens** by making sense of their stories within the Biblical metanarrative, inviting them to fulfil their desire for something more by experiencing the joy of living Jesus' way. For a Biblically illiterate generation, this strategy non-coercively shares stories which demonstrate the existential truth, goodness and beauty of the Bible, thereby establishing its relevance as a resource upon which teens may draw in constructing a meaningful life.

In short, this approach inspires teens to read the Bible as a **relevant story**.

➥ **For your context, what kinds of attitudes and thinking must we address to commend the Bible as relevant to adolescent outsiders right now?**

➥ **What kind of questions could you ask that would arouse interest in the Biblical story?**



From your experience, share with the group what one Biblical story you've found most powerfully speaks to the hopes, fears, and deep desires of today's teens. What approaches have you found to be most effective in helping an adolescent outsider see his or her life as part of the Bible's big story?

Relevant research concerning adolescent attitudes to the Bible in the Western context:

Most western schools today teach adolescents—in their English classes primarily—how to deconstruct any text to find the hidden agenda. This applies to advertisements, songs, movies, and even the Bible. As such, the church's internal disagreements over Scripture have not helped the Bible's credibility, or its relevance. Fundamentalists at times treat Genesis like a science textbook, while liberals tend to “safeguard” religious meaning by mythologizing all historical assertions. The “right” and “left” seemingly turn to the Scriptures only to support their own striving for influence and power. In turn, this casts suspicion on anyone quoting the Bible, whether concerning sexual ethics or foreign policy: “That's just your *interpretation!*”¹⁷ Even Christian teens in America are quick to state that “I'm not too religious.” “I'm not a fanatic, I don't . . . go up and down the street waving a Bible,” testifies a fourteen-year-old Texan.¹⁸ NRIs (those with No Religious Identification) commonly perceive Christians as on a moral hobbyhorse with the Bible acting as a megaphone to amplify judgment, especially against “gays.”¹⁹

The Bible is commonly perceived as irrelevant, not because it sidesteps issues that interest teens—such as sexual ethics—but rather because what it does say is so clearly out of step with popular morality on issues such as abortion, homosexuality, roles of women, and pre-marital sex. Apparently the popular teaching in youth ministry that the Bible is a “love letter from God” has done little to change adolescent opinion that the Bible is an outdated, controlling authority that will only restrict their fun and freedom.

On this front, Americans are the outlier. As mentioned earlier, American adolescents are far more respectful toward the Scriptures than any other nation's teens. But with so few reading the Bible for themselves, their respect is vacuous, as reflected by 60 percent of teens believing that “all religious faiths teach equally valid truths.”²⁰ As the logic goes, pick a religion, or none—it makes little difference. Nearly 70 percent of American teens may claim to be “very familiar with all the major principles and teachings of the Christian faith.”²¹ The reality is, however, that today's youth are *Biblically illiterate*.

¹⁷ Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus*, 217.

¹⁸ Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 141, 143.

¹⁹ Mason and others, *Gen Y*, 78-80, 214.

²⁰ Barna, *Real Teens*, 125-27. More recent research by David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, *UnChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks About Christianity . . . and Why It Matters* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2007), report that only 30 percent of sixteen- to twenty-nine-year-olds believe the Bible is “accurate in all the principles it teaches” (p. 24).

²¹ Barna, 130.

In 2005, the Gallup Organization conducted a nationally representative survey of American teens concerning Biblical knowledge.²² Positively, the majority of American teens were familiar with Christian usage of “‘Easter,’ ‘Adam and Eve,’ ‘Moses,’ ‘The Golden Rule,’ and ‘The Good Samaritan.’” Yet, only one-third to one-half of teens could identify key sayings from the Sermon on the Mount, what Jesus did at Cana, and Paul’s experience on the road to Damascus.²³ The majority of English teachers surveyed were concerned over decreasing adolescent Biblical literacy.²⁴ Less than 10 percent of public schools taught a Biblical unit, primarily because teachers feared legal repercussions and claims of intolerance.²⁵ Lacking even a rudimentary knowledge of Biblical facts, it is reasonable to conclude that adolescent understanding of the overall Biblical story, and the mission of Jesus therein, is even more limited and distorted.²⁶



²² Marie Wachlin and Byron R. Johnson, *Bible Literacy Report: What Do American Teens Need to Know and What Do They Know?* (New York: Bible Literacy Project, 2005), 1-5, <http://www.bibleliteracy.org/Secure/Documents/BibleLiteracyReport2005.pdf> (accessed 27 May 2008).

²³ Ibid., 24-25.

²⁴ Ibid., 14.

²⁵ Ibid., 5-7, 16-18.

²⁶ Australian and Canadian Biblical literacy, as less Christian countries, would be worse.



[7] Putting it all together—addressing groups and marshalling resources (12:50-12:55)

They got up and returned at once to Jerusalem. There they found the Eleven and those with them, assembled together and saying, "*It is true!* The Lord has risen and has appeared to Simon." Then the two told what had happened on the way, and how *Jesus was recognized by them when he broke the bread.* (Luke 24:33-35)

⌚ **We've covered a lot of ground in this session, and explored three distinct angles to engaging adolescent outsiders, shaping their thinking to see the Bible as plausible, credible, and relevant. But how do we put all this together? What does all this mean in practice? Let's return to the metaphor of the teen lost somewhere in Malaysia's jungle.**

By authentically entering into a teen's life, listening to stories of her journey thus far, you may earn her trust and discover reference points for subsequent dialogue. Based upon the little you know of this teen, you may ask indirect first-level questions inviting her to open up about how she sees the world—that is, encouraging her to move up higher.²⁷ Following Bell you may ask her to share what presently makes her most happy, hopeful, alive or afraid. Following Strobel you may ask her opinion on what she was taught in science or history class or saw in a related movie or documentary. You may also ask what she thinks about moral standards in light of the latest schoolyard gossip. If she still seems uninterested or resistant to opening up, you may gently probe how she reconciles apparent contradictions between what she says ("Right and wrong are relative") and what she does (judging others' indiscretions as self-evidently immoral). As she opens up, you will find opportunity to inspire, inform and challenge the teen, thus advancing the dialogue.

If in doubt concerning where to start, I suggest you adopt Bell's approach which most powerfully (and least defensively) speaks to the sociological context of contemporary western adolescents. As a general guideline, Bell's approach is most effective with relatively open nominal Christians and New Agers, Strobel's approach is most effective with skeptical teens asking detailed questions, and Schaeffer's approach is most effective with atheists, agnostics and deists who are antagonistic toward or dismissive of the Bible as an inspired and authoritative revelation.

As the dialogue continues and the teen articulates what were formerly tacit beliefs and attitudes, you will form an increasingly clear sense of her interests, character and perspective. You may then ask more direct second-order questions that relate what she has already shared to the Bible. A useful set of opening questions may include the following: Have you ever read the Bible? Why, or Why not? What did you make of it? If there were reasons to believe that the Bible really is God's inspired Word—and I said *if*—how might this make a difference in your life?

²⁷ Walt Mueller shares a helpful list of twenty questions toward better understanding individual teens in *Engaging the Soul of Youth Culture: Bridging Teen Worldviews and Christian Truth* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 49.

Questions may then be asked which derive from the three distinct approaches of Schaeffer, Strobel and Bell. Following Bell you may ask what she understands to be the Bible's basic storyline, and if she identifies with any of the characters or subplots therein. (If she is unsure, you can share connections based upon what you already know of her life journey.) Following Strobel you may ask if there is one major objection she has to trusting what the Bible says. Following Schaeffer you may ask if she thinks it is possible that the Bible is a genuine account of a personal and intelligent God communicating with His creation. (Also, you may ask how the teen could discern whether the Bible is or isn't God's Word.) How she responds to these questions—with interest or indifference, clarity or confusion, warmth or hostility—roughly *triangulates* her location relative to the three approaches. At this point you may primarily engage the teen from the direction of whichever approach is most proximate and prominent to her personally—seeking to engage her experience, advance credible truths, or undermine secularism—drawing upon the other two approaches as needed in a cumulative case argument.²⁸ Such an approach may also be employed in dialoguing with adolescent clusters as you principally engage the most vocal individuals speaking on behalf of the group. In doing so, you engage in an integrated and person-centered apologetic flexible enough to be all things to all people. This is a rough outline of how *apologetic triangulation* may work in practice. I believe this strategy will fruitfully guide your efforts in commanding to contemporary western adolescents the Bible as the Word of God.

► ***What we say is only one part of a holistic strategy to shape the thinking of teens toward the Bible. What kind of actions will best frame and reinforce your dialogue? What kind of experiences will make what you say sink in, thus commanding the Bible as genuinely plausible, credible, and relevant?***

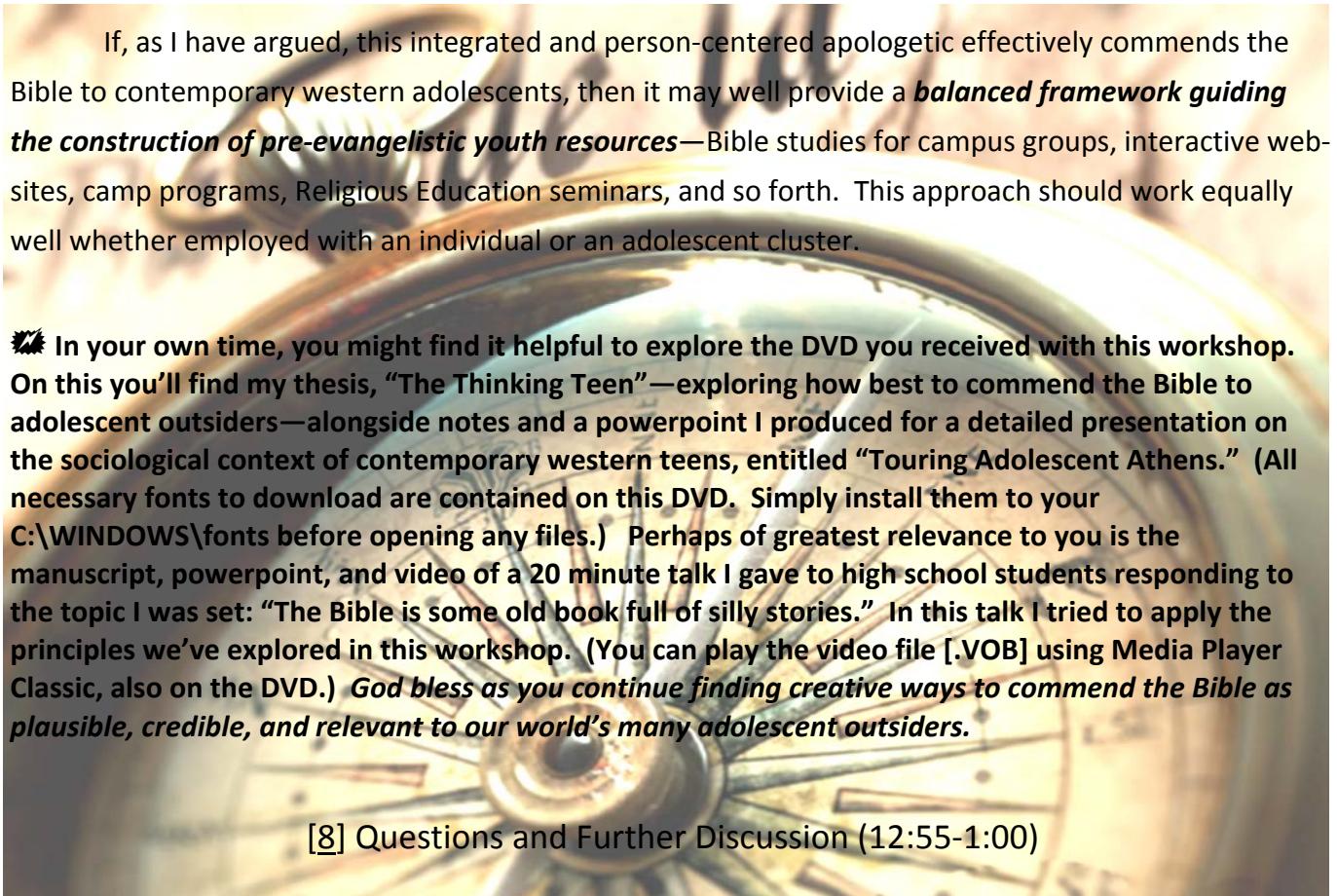
(For instance, the relevance of the Bible is powerfully reinforced by connecting with a loving community, and experiencing the freedom and excitement that comes by making a difference in the world. For youth with a social conscience who care about issues like poverty and environmental destruction, we may invite them on day or weekend initiatives to feed the poor, plant trees, and the like, beginning and ending each day with a devotion from a relevant portion of the Scriptures [e.g. Genesis 1-2, Micah, Luke 4:18-19] that grounds these compassionate acts. In turn, each teen's story can be connected to the Biblical story of creation, fall, restoration, and consummation.)

➲ ***In wrapping up what I've tried to share, what does it take to effectively commend the inspiration and authority of the Bible to contemporary adolescents?*** Ultimately our hope is not in any strategy, but in God Himself. Having done our best to talk about the Bible, and in an attitude of prayer-filled expectation, we must commit the teen to God in the hope that she will read the Scriptures for herself and then, in response to the Spirit's drawing, call out to be rescued by Christ—the one to whom the Scriptures point. Yet God calls us to use our minds and understand our audience—in Paul's words, to be “all things to all people that some may be saved.”

²⁸ For instance, while you may primarily be seeking to inform a skeptical teen of the Bible's historical and moral credibility, you may find it useful to challenge naturalistic presuppositions that block her from accepting miraculous accounts and also share your story of how believing and living what Jesus taught has transformed your life.

What, then, am I contending? *First*, we must recognize that ***all teens are “thinking teens”*** who seek to make sense of their world to varying degrees. As such, any approach which emphasizes the personal, the relational, the emotional and the aesthetic to the exclusion of the mind is at best incomplete and at worst detrimental in our attempt to apologetically commend the Bible to adolescent outsiders. *Second*, in light of the psychosocial complexity and diversity among today’s teens, ***we require a flexible and multifaceted approach capable of opening ears by undermining secularism, establishing trust through advancing plausible truths, and arousing interest by engaging experience.*** With some modifications, the approaches of Schaeffer, Strobel and Bell effectively meet these needs. *Third*, despite differences among these three approaches, we can legitimately integrate them together to ***make the case that God’s Word is plausible, credible, and relevant***—as warranted by logical, empirical, and existential verification. (This is the process, but obviously not how we would word it with teens! Basically, we’re suggesting that the more they search and engage the Scriptures, the more they’ll find that it is believable/reasonable, trustworthy, and liveable/relevant, so it’s worth a look. At this point they may be prepared to read the Scriptures for themselves with an open mind, using the kind of excellent tools we’ve explored at this conference.) *Fourth*, in light of the unique locatedness of each teen and the Biblical affirmation of personality, we are wise to pursue ***a person-centered apologetic driven by insightful questions in the context of authentic dialogue.*** Through the process of ***apologetic triangulation*** we may roughly identify the particular perspective of our interlocutor, thereby determining our direction of approach. This responsive and custom-made apologetic serves to ***challenge, inform and inspire the thinking teen to read the Scriptures with an open and receptive mind***, through which the Holy Spirit may convince the adolescent outsider that the Bible truly is the inspired and authoritative Word of God.

If, as I have argued, this integrated and person-centered apologetic effectively commends the Bible to contemporary western adolescents, then it may well provide a ***balanced framework guiding the construction of pre-evangelistic youth resources***—Bible studies for campus groups, interactive websites, camp programs, Religious Education seminars, and so forth. This approach should work equally well whether employed with an individual or an adolescent cluster.

 ***¶ In your own time, you might find it helpful to explore the DVD you received with this workshop. On this you’ll find my thesis, “The Thinking Teen”—exploring how best to commend the Bible to adolescent outsiders—alongside notes and a powerpoint I produced for a detailed presentation on the sociological context of contemporary western teens, entitled “Touring Adolescent Athens.” (All necessary fonts to download are contained on this DVD. Simply install them to your C:\WINDOWS\fonts before opening any files.) Perhaps of greatest relevance to you is the manuscript, powerpoint, and video of a 20 minute talk I gave to high school students responding to the topic I was set: “The Bible is some old book full of silly stories.” In this talk I tried to apply the principles we’ve explored in this workshop. (You can play the video file [.VOB] using Media Player Classic, also on the DVD.) God bless as you continue finding creative ways to commend the Bible as plausible, credible, and relevant to our world’s many adolescent outsiders.***

λεγονότιό γά τοσέστι
ἄληθώς οπροφήτης
ἄλλοι ελεγονότοσέ
στινόχοδιδεέλεγον
μὴ γάρ εκτήσγαλειλά
ασόχορχεταιούγκηγρα
φηεπενότιεκτούς περ
ματοσδαλαγειλατάπο
βηθλεεμτήσκώμης
οπογήναδαγειλερχεται
όχος σχίμαδύνεγένε
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τονπαράγτογκαίγνω
τίποιει απεκρίθησαν
καίειπανάγτωμηκαί
σύεκτήσγαλειλατάσει

έργυνησονκαίδεότι
εκτήσγαλειλάτασπρο
φήτησούκεγειρεται
κτιπάλινόγναύτοισέλλαλ
σεντίσλεγωνέγφειη
τόφωστόγκοσμογό
άκολουθώνμοιόγμη
περιπατησηέντησκο
τιλλαλέζειτόφωστό
ζωής είπονόγναύ
τώσιφαρεισαίοισύπε
ρίσεαγτούμαρτύρεις
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