

WHAT'S THE BIBLE GOT TO DO WITH ME?

~SHAPING THE THINKING OF TEENS OUTSIDE THE CHURCH~

David Benson (Kenmore Baptist Church, Australia: david.benson@kbc.org.au)



Context

The focus for this session was on shaping the thinking of teens outside the church toward the Bible—the group I'll refer to as “adolescent outsiders.” 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, or thinking about, 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?

Most of our Scripture Engagement tools are geared toward teens who are relatively open to the Scriptures though perhaps struggle to see the relevance. But what about the **antagonistic atheists** and seculars who favour naturalistic science over the implausible supernatural; the **untrusting skeptics** and agnostics who find the historical and moral assertions in the Bible literally in-credible; or the **confused seekers** and New Agers who want meaning to their life but are suspicious of any (religious) truth claims—no matter how seemingly relevant—lest they be duped and lose their “freedom”? **How do we reach these kinds of teens?**

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. We need a kind of map to plot where an individual teen is within the wider culture.

Space doesn't permit an exploration of the major forces shaping the attitudes of adolescent outsiders—forces like pluralism, postmodernism, secularism, consumerism, and widespread fragmentation and fragility. The key point I raised in the session, however, is that *our efforts to contextualize Bible engagement are only as good as our understanding of the target audience.*

The common assumption in much contemporary youth work is that teens are “postmodern”—morally relativistic, rejecting of logic in favour of relevance, and dismissing science in favour of stories, spirituality, and experience. Based upon these assumptions, many have shifted their Scripture Engagement strategies away from truth claims to purely experiential journeys into the story of the Bible. But is this *really* where youth are “at,” or is it a simplistic caricature?

My own experience and research suggests the latter.¹ *Experiencing the Scriptures is necessary but, by itself, insufficient to open up the thinking of teens outside the church.*² An exclusively postmodern approach is both sociologically problematic and psychologically suspect. 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.*

Based upon these findings, I constructed a more balanced model of engaging adolescent outsiders, shaping their thinking toward greater openness to the Bible. 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 short, this workshop unpacked a pre-evangelistic conversational strategy that challenges, informs, and inspires teens to see the Bible as plausible, credible, and relevant. This strategy is built upon the orienteering/outdoor-rescue technique called “triangulation”—through good questions and rightly orienting our map relative to the three highest and most distinct features, we can locate the position of a lost person, thus directing any rescue.

The Model: Apologetic Triangulation

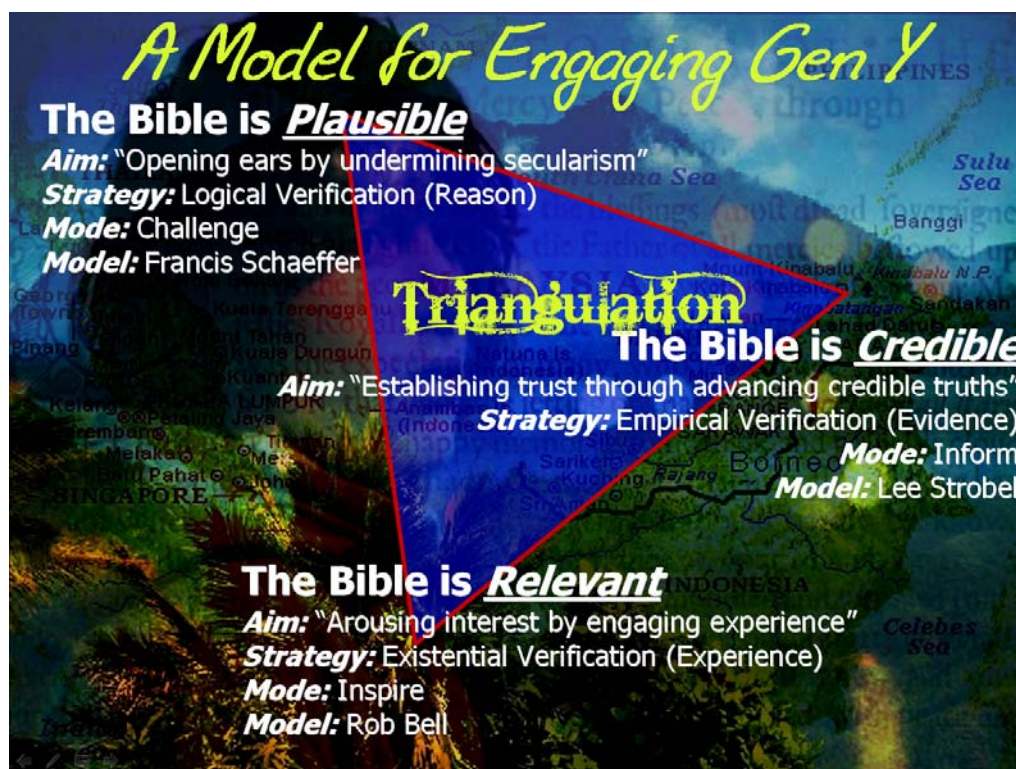
Apologetic triangulation is a strategy for engaging diverse teens in a pluralistic world, where each adolescent is on the same rough map, but coming from different angles in their thinking about the Bible.

Modelling off the discrete approaches of Francis Schaeffer, Lee Strobel, and Rob Bell, I found **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.

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.

² See, for instance, Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 226.

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 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 this strategy to facilitate teens moving *toward* embracing the Bible as the Word of God.



The Model in Practice

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. 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.

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?

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. 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. This framework is also useful for constructing and evaluating Scripture Engagement materials and presentations. In doing so, we engage in an integrated and person-centered apologetic flexible enough to be all things to all people.