
The Tools you use and the 'Tude you bring

A framework for approaching youth Scripture Engagement

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What issue was being addressed?

The 'issue' we are responding to is a model of engagement which is either purely about 'getting a new Bible resource into their hands'... or a 'one size fits all' approach. We proposed an alternate model which we are finding helpful as we seek to engage youth with scripture in a post-Christian culture.

The 'textbook' is still being written as far as understanding how to best engage youth with scripture – and in Australia it is especially challenging. Not only are youth disengaged with scripture, it is simply not on the radar for many of them – and that includes churched youth. In many ways un-churched youth are more receptive to the life, stories, and teachings of Jesus, however there are significant misconceptions and biases toward the Bible and God we must first confront and work through with them.

Effective youth scripture engagement requires an understanding of the culture, and also an array of resources (toolbox) from which you can draw in order to best engage them. We must first seek to understand the culture, context, values and history/aspirations of the people we're seeking to engage. Using a current or presenting issue as the starting point is key, as it creates urgency & demonstrates the relevance of scripture to real life.

This approach is being used by Scripture Union in Victoria in a schools-based context, and by Bible Society in South Australia in a youth group and schools context. In the whole process of seeking to engage youth with God's word, we must be mindful, and have confidence in the fact that God is at work in their life; it's our role to tap into what God's already doing.

How was the issue addressed, and with what effect?

We are addressing this issue of engaging youth with scripture by working through a process. Before launching into opening scripture we acknowledge the importance of asking the right questions. Get a rough sense of where the individuals or groups we work with are at, we might build relationship and in that context ask questions like:

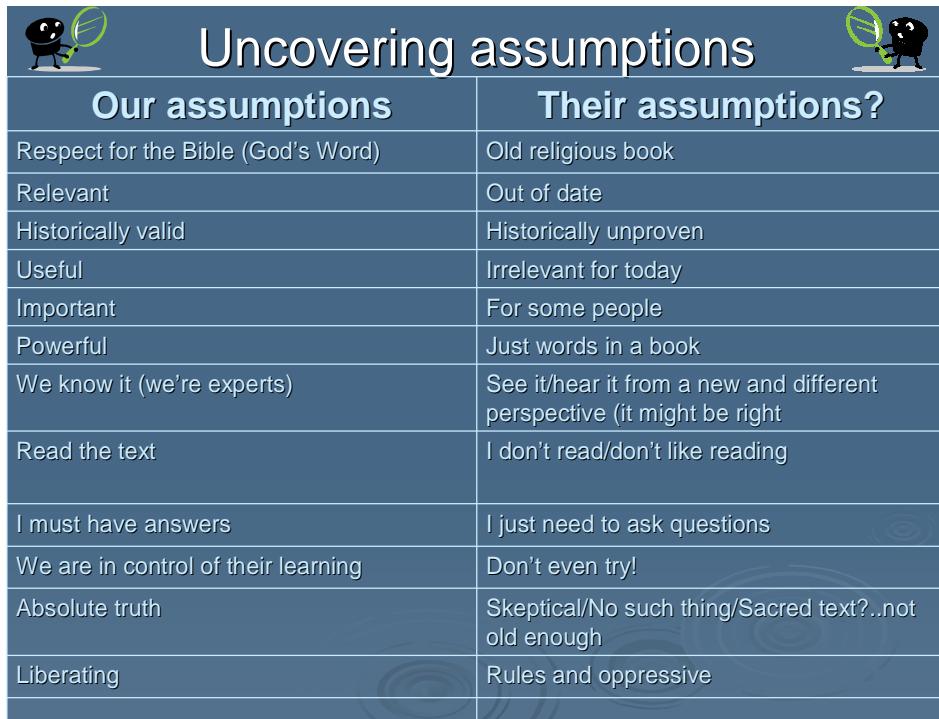
- What do you *honestly* find helps you in working out your life? Where does the Bible fit (*or doesn't it*)?
- Can you describe a moment/experience/approach with the Bible that was great or works for you? (*Be specific. What happened/what did you experience? What was your expectation of it? Was there a story behind what you did?*)
- Can you think of one Bible resource or tool that you've found helpful?
- What's one obstacle or issue that stops you engaging with the Bible more?

Through observation and discussion also explore the youth culture:

- What are the stories/events that are shaping the young people?
- Who are their heroes?
- Who/what is influencing them? (could be a current song, movie, sub-culture or popular identity they relate to)
- What's a day in the life look like for one of these young people?
- What's your hunch about the young person's response/attitude to the Bible?
- Where do they go for advice? (for comfort, perspective, courage...)
- What level can they read at? (do they like reading)

Historically we have fallen into the trap of allowing our approach to youth Bible engagement to be shaped by our assumptions.

Not assuming our audience is in line with our assumptions is an important start.



The table is titled 'Uncovering assumptions' and is divided into two columns: 'Our assumptions' and 'Their assumptions?'. It contains 15 rows of data, each with a pair of icons representing a magnifying glass and a book.

Our assumptions	Their assumptions?
Respect for the Bible (God's Word)	Old religious book
Relevant	Out of date
Historically valid	Historically unproven
Useful	Irrelevant for today
Important	For some people
Powerful	Just words in a book
We know it (we're experts)	See it/hear it from a new and different perspective (it might be right)
Read the text	I don't read/don't like reading
I must have answers	I just need to ask questions
We are in control of their learning	Don't even try!
Absolute truth	Skeptical/No such thing/Sacred text?..not old enough
Liberating	Rules and oppressive

Once we have some understanding of their perspective, the goal is to engage them where they are in their thinking and assumptions, and expose them to alternatives – without ‘dragging’ them there. We aim to begin to bridge the gap/s from their starting point to ours. We want them not just to hear but also to taste an alternative to their negative assumptions.

Historically much Bible use with youth actually scratches where there isn't an itch. I.e. a Bible study on a theological truth that kids don't currently care about. We approach engagement as seeking to ‘find the itch’, and resist the temptation to too quickly resolve. The ‘itch’ is the issue, topic or need that's felt or recognized by the young people.

Scratching the itch also involves using the right ‘tool’ to engage them, I.e.: Utilizing learning styles to engage kids. (to deliberately connect through your approach as well as content)

- Non book culture (literacy issues)
- Low-tech options (no online facility)
- Using the environment to enhance the story. I.e.: feeding of the 5000 at a picnic, healing the demoniac in a cemetery, any of the beside the sea stories at a beach, the temptation of Jesus from on the roof of a powerful building?.....etc

Having a versatile range of resources from which you can draw depending on who you are trying to engage with is vital. So it's good to become a collector of:

- Resources
- Websites
- Ideas

- Articles/stories
- People resources
- Visual aids
- Partnerships with like-minded organizations

There are many stories we could tell of how using this approach is enabling youth to really engage with scripture in life-changing ways. It does take time and effort, and is a far more 'personal' and deliberate approach to those methods used previously. It is effective in helping youth find themselves in God's story, and to discover how scripture actually does speak into their lives today.. AND it counters many negative messages they hear in the media, daily.

The resources to help people try this approach are not by any means on a production line – rather are currently either in the heads of skilled practitioners (tailoring for their crew) OR floating in amongst the flood of materials packed onto shelves & websites.

What makes a 'good' or effective resource for my context?

Here's some questions to ask yourself of the resource:

- Does it place the text **in** context? (literary, geographical/political), within the book it's from or as part of a bigger narrative/timeline..?
- Is it looking for 'right' answers (reading comprehension OR theological correction) rather than inviting a genuine grapple with the Bible (and life and God) through open ended questions?
- Does it take seriously the person or group (their life/culture/experiences/story) it's targeted for?
- Does it speak to JUST individuals (me) or have a collective perspective (we/us), too? (i.e.: Sins are not only personal, but also collective and systemic)
- If it has a 'Gospel' outline or prayer, does it have a framework of Good news or Bad news? Does it affirm that not only is God creator and good, but we are too - created in image & delighted in by God - AS WELL AS wearing the marks of the Fall and invited to receive God's forgiveness & grace.
- Is the medium (text-based/DVD/online) suitable for access for your context? (i.e.: do they have online access, can they read)

What was learned about Scripture Engagement?

Scripture engagement must allow the young person to 'discover' the message for themselves (as opposed to 'being told'). They need to discover the relevance and value of God's story for their lives, and our role is to be a guide, a storyteller, an encourager, and a listener to the Holy

Spirits guidance. We must resist the temptation to be a teacher, an expert, or another person trying to 'sell' them something.

Youth scripture engagement can be difficult, challenging and frustrating – and it is exhilarating, encouraging and life-changing when we see God at work in their lives as they themselves and see scripture in a new way.

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This document was first made available as a report of a workshop held at the World Wide Scripture Engagement Consultation in Malaysia in October 2009. It is now available for download at: <http://www.scripture-engagement.org>

Disclaimer: The views expressed in this article are those of the author and not necessarily those of the Forum of Bible Agencies International or its member organizations.