

Sharing the Faith with Young Adults by Joe Burnham

Subtly tucked away between the Samaritan woman running from the well to the town and the townspeople coming to meet this man who knew everything about her, Jesus teaches his disciples about the importance of sowing and reaping (John 4:31-38). Jesus points to the ministry that has already happened, the “gathering fruit for eternal life,” and declares that in this the “sower and reaper may rejoice together.”

Everybody loves to reap, it’s in reaping that we see the results ... it’s in reaping that we get to celebrate success ... reaping is followed by the banquet. On the other hand, sowing isn’t very exciting ... when sowing ends, all you see is dirt.

We all love to reap, but nobody likes to sow ... however, if there is no sower, there is nothing to reap. Jesus makes it clear to the disciples that all of their reaping is the conclusion of the work that others began: “I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor” and again, “others have labored, and you have entered into their labor.”

The disciples were reaping the fruit sown when God promised Eve her offspring would crush the head of the serpent (Genesis 3:15) ... when God promised Abraham that the nations would be blessed through him (Genesis 12:3) ... when God promised David his seed would rule Israel forever (2 Samuel 7:16) ... when God promised through Isaiah that the Messiah was coming. The whole history of the Old Testament is looking, with anticipation, for the Messiah so the disciples were gathering fruit from a field that was ripe for the harvest ... a field with fruit waiting to be picked ... a culture that was eagerly anticipating a Messiah, even if they didn’t know exactly what that Messiah looked like.

That society stands in stark contrast to young adult culture today where most people see no need for a Messiah at all. LHM’s recent survey reveals that 80.3% of unchurched¹ 25- to 29-year-olds deny that all people are sinful—a number that flows directly out of 79.5% saying that there is no absolute truth. This worldview declares that they can’t know right and wrong, making it, in their mind, impossible to define something as wrong (aka sinful).

In contrast, our Law-Gospel message is based on the biblical (and correct) worldview that knows not only that there is a right and wrong, but also that all people have done wrong. This worldview clash creates a unique challenge in sharing the Gospel with young adults.

To increase the challenge, these unchurched young adults are quasi-familiar with the church as almost 78% of them were raised in a home that described itself as Christian (49% claim the description today) and 15.1% of them have concluded that they do not trust organized religion (the highest percent of any age group).

The challenge is, “How do you reach out to a group of people who disagree with your basic assumptions and think they know your message ... which they have already decided is wrong?”

The answer ... it’s time to sow trusting that God will send someone to harvest (maybe sooner rather than later).

¹ Those who have no place they call a “church home” and have not been to church in the past year except for a special event.

Tips

Here are some tips on how to sow (and maybe even harvest) in today's young adult culture:

- **Have Fun:** It sounds simple, but Christians are stereotyped as boring, stuffy, or just plain hokey ... remember, *The Simpson's* Ned Flanders is the most recognized Christian in America.

I've met non-believers who were shocked that a church-going Christian would be at a concert, in a bar, or just out having a great time with friends and it broke down their misconceptions about Christians. Remember Solomon, who in his great wisdom said, "There is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil" (Ecclesiastes 2:24).

Not only is having fun celebrating God's provision, but it could be knocking down the walls in a non-believers heart.

- **Be Nice:** Again, it sounds simple, but young adults view Christians as judgmental. It's important for us to remember that while they've been called slackers, the term survivors is more appropriate.

25% were aborted. AIDS came on the scene during their childhood and they watched Ryan White die wondering if they were next. As children, the divorce rate skyrocketed and even those whose parents stayed together feared divorce. They are the original latchkey kids who raised themselves with the help of TV. To top it off they were looked down upon when they didn't adopt the values of their parents who strove to keep up with the Jones while remaining miserable.

They don't want pity, they just don't want to be disrespected for understandably having a different worldview (granted a largely non-biblical one). Instead of condemnation, they need a doctor (Matthew 9:9-13), but Christians need to prove they can be trusted ... over time, being nice will earn trust.

- **Reconsider the Law:** Traditionally we present the Law as accusatory ... it points the finger at what is wrong—and while this is what will ultimately happen, if we begin here we will also end here (in their mind, you have no right to declare what is right and wrong and attempting to do so will drive them away). Instead, we need to take the approach of presenting a different way of living to compare with their own.

Peter writes, "Always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you" (1 Peter 3:15). Apologists have claimed this as the proof-text for logical defenses of the Christian faith, but that really doesn't fit the context of the verse. Instead, Peter is exhorting Christians who live in the midst of persecution to be ready to explain why they have hope. In other words, the non-believers witness the Christian's faithfulness in the midst of persecution and want to know more about a faith that is so incredible that remaining steadfast is more important than life itself.

Non-believers are not challenging the faith, they see a life better than their own, which causes them to feel the accusatory effects of the law in their own lives (later we can label this as sin) and seek out the remedy Christians appear to have.

- **Make a Defense:** Everywhere we look story is around us. Movies, theater, TV, even commercials are all telling stories, many of which try to become the stories that define our lives ... and we have

the greatest story of them all.

To better the situation, in a culture of inclusion, the one thing that can't be questioned is someone else's story. When we "make a defense" we are inviting others to join in the story that we've been joined to in Baptism ... Christ's story (Romans 6:3-4).

Doing this well is difficult ... make sure you check out how to develop your story below.

Resources

Here are some other resources to check out:

- www.RE-YourLife.com: This is a LHM site for young adults. It challenges them to re-reflect on life, re-think Jesus, and re-focus on life in Christ's light. A key part of the site is a moderated online discussion board where people from around the world discuss faith and life.
- www.lhm.org/profile: Make sure you read up on the Great Beginnings segment.
- ***Spirituality of the Cross* by Gene Edward Veith**: Simply put, this is the best book available to explore the basics of Lutheran Christianity and, even better, the writing style appeals to young adults (making it a good piece to study on relevant but faithful communication).
- ***Finding Common Ground* by Tim Downs**: This is not a Lutheran book, but it's a great study of sowing and the activities of the sower, namely cultivating, planting, and nurturing.
- ***Postmodern Pilgrims* by Leonard Sweet**: Another non-Lutheran book, but it is an excellent resource to initiate brainstorming on how to reach out to the young adult culture.

Practice

How to develop your own "defense":

- **Not Just "Your" Story**: The key to remember is that you are not just telling your story, but you are using your story to tell His story on a personal basis.
- **The Creed**: The basic outline for the story is the Apostles' Creed ... that, not by coincidence, was spoken at your Baptism when God brought you into His story (Romans 6:3-4). You won't share the Creed in your defense, but it provides the concepts to move through as you tell the story:
 - I believe in God the Father Almighty ... as Christians, we understand the Father as our provider and our protector (*Luther's Small Catechism*, The Creed: First Article), but what if we didn't have this relationship with Him in Christ?

Read Isaiah's reaction to the Father's presence in Isaiah 6.

This is the first element of the story ... life without God's grace. Some of you can remember a time when you didn't have a relationship with God, what was it like. For

those who don't recall ever being without God, tell about what you witnessed happening in someone else's life that made you realize God's presence in your own.

As suggestions, you could talk about a deep-rooted sense of shame, always trying but never managing to be good enough, a lack of peace, or living in fear. The goal isn't to portray the Christian life as perfect, but to prepare the way for what you do have now in Christ ... it prepares the way for the third part of the story.

- And in Jesus Christ ... here we share what God has done in Christ to counter the first part of the story.

It is very important here that the first and second parts of the story connect. It doesn't do much good to say, "I was scared of dying but Jesus fixed it by taking away my sin." It makes much more sense to say, "I was scared of dying, but Jesus conquered death."

- I believe in the Holy Spirit ... finally, we get to tell what this life in Christ looks like now and what we get to look forward to eternally. This fleshes out what was revealed in the second part of the story (and therefore coordinates with the first part).

With our previous example, you could say, "I was scared of dying, but Jesus conquered death and now I have nothing to fear because I know what happens after death ... I know I will live forever in perfection."

- **Preparing:** As you develop your defense, practice it as you would any speech ... not so it sounds planned, but is natural and has a flow to it. Talk about it with your pastor and ask if there are ways to further emphasize Christ's work so it remains His story. Remember, "Always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you" (1 Peter 3:15).

Practice using this example...

You've been chatting with a younger coworker after Bob another coworker's retirement party. He looks at you and confesses, "You know, Bob's a great guy and all, but I really don't want to be like him. His entire life has been about this company ... I like my job, but I don't want it to be who I am. I just seems like there is more to life than the daily grind, I'm just not sure what it is or where to find it."

Pray: "Father, thank You for allowing me this opportunity to share Your story. Grant me the wisdom to speak words of life. In Jesus name. Amen."

Listen: What is this younger coworker struggling with? How is he feeling the effects of the Law in his life? How have you had, or witnessed others having, this same struggle? How does Jesus' death and resurrection provide a solution?

Share: Use your story to tell His story on a personal basis. Begin with a situation comparable to his and move to the Jesus solution in your life. Let the story speak for itself, if it strikes an immediate chord, the coworker will ask for more ... if it doesn't, let your story resonate and allow the Spirit to use it overtime.

Pray: Once the conversation has ended, keep your coworker in prayer.

- **Sharing:** Actual sharing will become very comfortable over time ... you'll discover that it is very conversational and over time, sharing will become very natural. In addition, you will learn ways to

adapt your story so it parallels the experience of the person you are sharing with ... and makes it more likely that they will relate (if they lack peace in life it doesn't help that you're not afraid of death).

Young adult culture presents some unique challenges when presenting the faith, but by breaking down stereotypes we can prepare hearts to witness and receive the love of Christ.



Joe Burnham, a rostered DCE and student of culture, is preparing for his vicarage in Aurora, CO. He's part of the Synod's missionary formation program as a church planter.