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Not Interested: Communicating with Those Indifferent to the Gospel

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Presidential message at the 2022 Annual Conference of the Great Commission Research Network held in Orlando, Florida. Parts of this address are based on Moon and Simon (2021).

Picture a visit to a university campus as you stroll through a dining hall and talk with people you meet. When you bring up questions about faith, you hear responses such as, “Religion is irrelevant to my life and neither good nor bad,” “My life got busier,” and “Church was boring and there was no need for it.” These are actual comments from surveys conducted by Bethany Moon on the American University campus in Washington, DC, in 2020.

These students are not hostile to faith discussions. Instead, they are simply *indifferent*. They often don’t see the relevance of being part of a church, and they don’t see the purpose behind faith either. So how do you engage people that seem to be indifferent to faith and church? Did Jesus ever engage those who were indifferent? This article explores three different worldviews and discusses the emerging worldview of indifference. Then, I provide some guidance from Jesus’ approach to those who were indifferent in his day.

In a Previous Generation

Evangelism in a previous generation was similar to a revival meeting. When you engaged people in faith discussions, you were trying to bring them back to a faith they once had, or their parents had. At least there was some Christian memory or awareness that the evangelist wanted to awaken. This assumption is no longer true in many settings, such as school, work, and leisure activities. Today, you are more likely to engage people of different faith systems. You may encounter a Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, or even Wiccan with all kinds of different varieties and combinations in between, including those who are indifferent. A research project over the last eight years has been conducted in partnership with Knox fellowship and Asbury Theological Seminary in order to identify the complexities and opportunities for faith sharing in this generation. Cohorts of students meet for eight weeks to prepare to engage people of different faiths. During the last week, students invite unchurched and de-churched people to a meal in order to engage them in faith conversations.

Cliff Jumping

During the first week of the cohort, I tell students that, eight weeks from now, you will be in faith discussion with perhaps Muslims, Buddhists, and Wiccans. A look of fear spreads across their face, almost like I just asked them to jump off a cliff! To be honest, I have done some cliff jumping in the past, so I know that fear. When I leaped off of a 60-foot cliff, the fear immediately arose and accelerated each second in the air. The funny thing about jumping off of a high cliff is that you get a lot of time to think as you are in midair! As the water is coming toward you, thoughts arise like, “How did I get here?” and “How is this going to end?” Students often feel the same way when asked to enter into faith discussions with those from other worldviews. During the first week of the cohort, they are fearful about how to get into faith conversations and how will it end. After training over 500 participants in these cohorts, we have noticed an increase in the students’ confidence (from 39% to 87%) and competence (from 31% to 93%; Moon, 2017). I will share some of what we learned in order to help people overcome their fears. First, though, some definitions are needed to establish some common ground and plot the way forward (See Moon & Simons, 2021, for a more in-depth discussion).

Definitions

Intercultural evangelism is “The process of *worldview change* that *initiates* people into Christian *discipleship* through *culturally relevant starting points*.” The goal is to initiate people into discipleship.

Evangelism seeks to change the worldview and not simply add another cognitive assertion on top of an existing worldview (more on that later). In addition, as opposed to evangelism and discipleship being two separate tasks, this is really one long process where the goal of evangelism, as Billy Abraham (1989) told us in the *Logic of Evangelism*, is to initiate people into a long journey of discipleship. Finding culturally relevant starting points is crucial since I assume that God is already starting a conversation with everybody you meet, even those who don't recognize it yet. The role of the evangelist is to catch up on that conversation and keep that moving towards Christ. Evangelists need to listen well to identify the unique starting point that God has already initiated with that person. Within different worldviews, those starting points are often also very different, although there are recognizable patterns.

Missiologist Paul Hiebert (2008, pp. 25-26) defines worldview as "The foundational cognitive, affective, and evaluative assumptions and frameworks a group of people makes about the nature of reality which they use to order their lives. It encompasses people's images or maps of the reality of all things that they use for living their lives." Note that this definition includes the things you think about, but it's also the things that you love and value. James K. A. Smith (2016) is fond of saying, "You become what you love" – not simply what you think. If somebody comes to faith and they just change what they think, but they don't change what they love, then what happens? Since they still love the things in the world, they still act like people in the world! Worldviews then affect what people think, but also what they love, and how they evaluate decisions. Evangelism needs to engage a person at the worldview level.

Worldviews are like different colored lenses: If you wear blue-tinted glasses, then everything you see has a blue tint. Worldviews are so important then because they color everything we think, love, and value. As a result, understanding someone's worldview gives the evangelist a helpful starting point concerning where God is already having a conversation with someone. This is precisely why a "one size fits all" evangelism approach often falls short: God has different conversations with people through the different worldviews they inhabit.

Guilt/Justice Worldview

In a previous generation, aspiring evangelists were often taught a gospel formula similar to this: all of us have sinned. Because of the guilt our sin has produced, we are separated from God. Jesus takes the guilt of sin upon himself. Like a judge slamming the gavel down, God says, "Not guilty!" The meaning of the cross is that Jesus takes our guilt upon himself; therefore,

justice has been performed and we stand justified before God guilt-free. Ninety-nine percent of the time when I hear an evangelistic message on the radio, it follows this type of approach. It assumes that people have internal guilt and that the cross brings justice before God to remove that guilt. This makes sense for a worldview that views guilt as the result of sin. What happens, though, if guilt is not the primary response to sin? In a pluralist society, people do not always have guilt; instead, they may respond to sin with shame, fear, or even indifference. Without realizing it, we have put on a straitjacket that restricts our explanation of the gospel. While that straight jacket fits for one worldview, such as a guilt/justice worldview, it is terribly inadequate for other worldviews. Instead of assuming that everybody has guilt and therefore we can present salvation in terms of justice, what if there are other starting points to explain the gospel?

New Testament scholar Brenda Colijn (2010, 14–16) explains,

The New Testament does not develop a systematic doctrine of salvation. Instead, it presents us with a variety of pictures taken from different perspectives. ... the variety of images attests to both the complexity of the human problem and its solution Each image is a picture of salvation from one perspective, posing and answering one set of questions.

She describes twelve different images that are different images of salvation from various perspectives. Each image poses another set of questions and provides another set of responses. In short, these different worldviews describe where God has started a conversation with people about how they regard the effect of sin to explain the significance of the cross for them. Missiologist Craig Ott (2014) explains that evangelists should “begin with a biblical analogy that has the most common ground with the hearers’ worldview.”

Fear/Power Worldview

What does it look like to engage a different worldview that is not based upon guilt/justice? When I lived in Ghana, West Africa, I labored for a solid year to learn the language well enough to explain the gospel to the Builsa people. I was excited to finally be in the position to share the gospel! I started off using the same formula explained above that assumes people have guilt that Jesus can remove to restore their just standing before God. At the end of my explanation, they looked at me and said, “Well, that’s interesting - but not really.”

I was shocked.

How can the gospel be of little interest? I did not realize that I had limited the gospel presentation to a guilt/justice worldview whereas the Builsa had an entirely different worldview. To get a sense of their worldview, look at Figure 1.



Figure 1. *Builsa at the Fiok Festival*

This event is called the *Fiok* festival where the Builsa commemorate when they repelled the Muslim slave raiders from the north who previously conducted a jihad and captured the Builsa as slaves to sell them to other tribes, eventually ending in the transatlantic slave trade. This is similar to the U.S. Fourth of July celebration where we commemorate our independence. Look at what they're wearing on their smocks: These are pieces of leather that they took to an earth shrine called the *tengbain* to collect dirt that is sewn inside to give them spiritual protection. The fear of spiritual forces, witchcraft, juju, or the evil eye lurk just below the surface in the Builsa culture. They don't look at the effect of sin as being internal guilt; instead, the effect of sin has produced fear. This is an important distinction.

In Genesis 3, God seeks out Adam and Eve after they sinned. In response to God's calling him, Adam responds, "I heard you in the garden,

and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid.” (Genesis 3:10). In other words, one of the first results of sin was fear. When I explained the gospel to the Builsa in terms of how the cross addresses their fear (and not only guilt), there was a totally different response. The gospel made much more sense when focusing on God’s restoration of power to those in fear, using a gospel presentation similar to the following: In the beginning, our first ancestors were close to God. Once they disobeyed God, humans were afraid, and God put a curse upon humanity. God promised that one day the seed of the woman would bring someone who would crush the head of the devil to remove the fear of witchcraft, evil eye, juju, and everything else. In the fullness of time, God sent his own son named Jesus to remove that curse. When the Builsa heard this good news, they often responded, “Tell me more!” They recognized that the gospel is the power of God for salvation. Instead of simply a good way to remove guilt, Jesus offers the power of God to overcome fear. That is a very different starting point to share the gospel since the worldview is fear/power.

Shame/Honor Worldview

What happens when you engage people from a worldview that does not recognize the effects of sin as producing guilt or fear? Many cultures regard the result of sin as producing shame. While guilt is an inner individual response to sin, shame is an outward collective response to sin. Going back to the story of Adam and Eve in the garden, before they ate the fruit, Genesis 2:25 describes the happy couple this way, “Adam and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame.” Once they sin, though, “they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves” (Genesis 3:7). This is when shame entered the human experience.

One of the effects of sin then is shame (not simply guilt and fear). This worldview recognizes that shame is like a credit card: You can add to it (by saving face) or subtract from it (by losing face). In this worldview, those who are shamed are not looking for justice or power; instead, they are looking for honor. In the shame/honor worldview, Jesus offers honor to restore people to the family of God. The prodigal son story in Luke 15 provides a good gospel explanation since the son’s honor is restored (signified by the ring and the robe) as a member of the family again.

Figure 2 summarizes the discussion so far concerning three different worldviews. Since sin results in a different response in each worldview, the significance of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection is viewed differently. The image of salvation that is most relevant to them is also very different. A relationship with God is then viewed differently as well.

	Worldview		
	Guilt/Justice	Shame/Honor	Fear/Power
Typical location:	West (N. America, Europe)	East (Middle East, N. Africa, Asia)	South (sub-Saharan Africa, tribal, Caribbean)
Sin’s result:	separation/guilt	shame	fear/curse/bondage
Solution in Jesus:	payment/substitute	honor restored, cleansed	deliverance
Image of salvation:	courtroom/justice	relationship, cleansing	power, freedom
Relationship with God:	Judge who declares, “Not guilty!”	Father who restores honor	Creator who protects and delivers

Figure 2. *Evangelism differences among three common worldviews*

What happens though when people do not exhibit the typical responses to sin? Returning to our university students, how do you engage someone who does not express guilt, fear, or shame?

Indifference/Belonging with Purpose Worldview

This is another unique starting point that is not simply limited to North America: It also includes the former Communist bloc countries, as well as other post-Christian contexts that have been affected by secularization. This is a growing demographic so we cannot simply ignore those in this worldview; instead, we need to understand and engage their worldview. Again, we can assume that God is already having a conversation with those who are indifferent, even if they are not willing to admit it.

In our research at Asbury Theological Seminary, we kept running into people whose worldview did not fall into the categories of guilt/justice, shame/honor, or fear/power. Eventually, we realized what sociology professor Steve Bruce (2002:42) described, “The end point of secularization is not atheism but religious indifference.” During our research, we noticed that those in the addictive community are often open to the fear/power worldview discussion. In addition, the shame/honor worldview seems to be on the rise among people connected to social media since shame needs

an audience and social media provides a large audience. But indifference was the dominant worldview.

To understand this indifferent worldview a bit more, a 2019 National Study of American Twentysomethings (NSAT) was conducted (Clydesdale and Garces-Foley, 2019). They surveyed 1,880 young adults, conducted 200 interviews, interviewed 49 religiously unaffiliated (“nones”), and studied 11 congregations and parachurch ministries that were effective at reaching the twenty-somethings. Figure 3 summarizes the religious affiliation of the twenty-somethings studied.

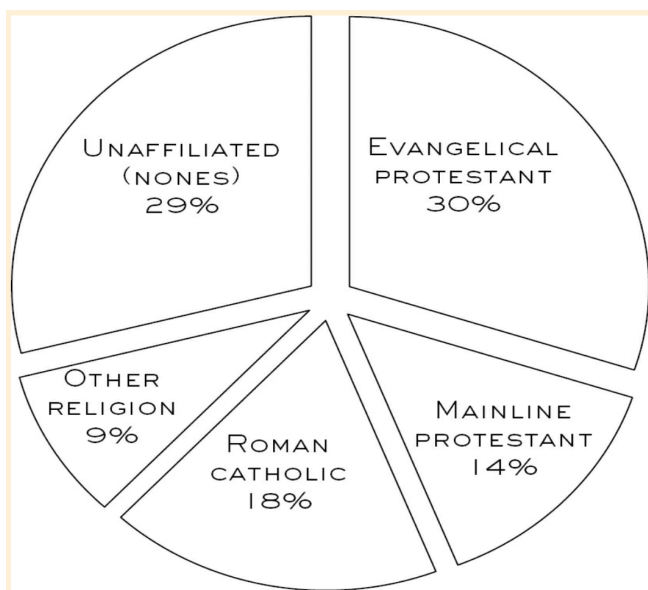


Figure 3. *Religious Affiliation of Twenty-Somethings*

This is how these 20 Somethings were grouped. The largest group of 30% were evangelical Protestants, 14% were mainline Protestants, 18% were Roman Catholics, and other religions were 9%. Look at the unaffiliated (nones) who make up 29%. This is almost the largest group. This is significant not simply due to the large percentage but also because it is growing rapidly. The NSAT drilled down into this group of unaffiliated (nones) to understand their religious perspectives further, as summarized in Figure 4.

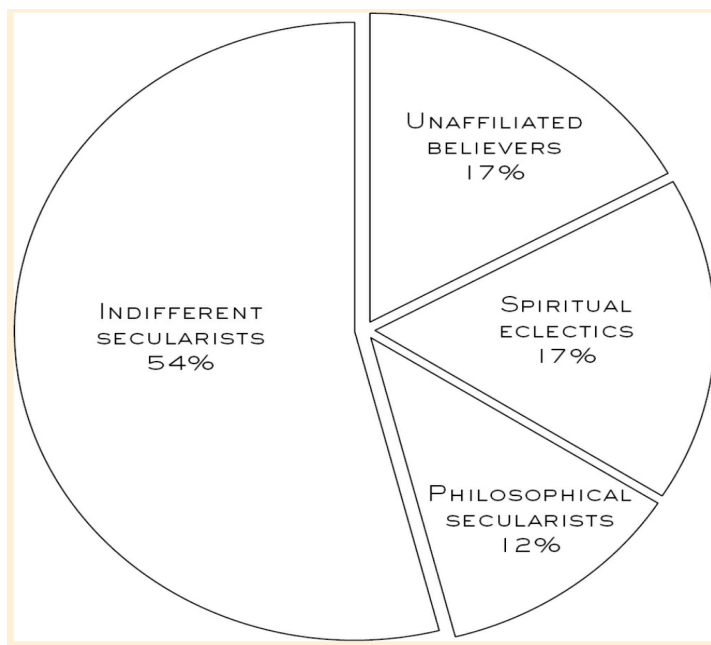


Figure 4. *Types of Unaffiliated Twenty-Something (Nones)*

Seventeen percent of the group are unaffiliated believers, meaning they still consider themselves Christians, but they just don't see the relevance of going to church. Seventeen percent are spiritual eclectics. Missiologists use the term syncretists for those who combine some Christian practices with practices of other religions such as Buddhism or a local folk religion, forming an eclectic mix. Those 12% who are philosophical secularists compose a rather small group. These are the ones who philosophically have convinced themselves that secularism makes the most sense. Incidentally, Tim Keller (2016) described a 'crisis of secularism' that is actually growing where people recognize that secularism has so many gaps in meaning. Since secularism alone cannot address these questions, many conclude secularism is not a very tenable position after all.

The largest group though, by far, is the indifferent secularists at 54%. This demographic is one that we need to understand and engage. Where is a good starting point for gospel conversations with the indifferent crowd?

John Stott, in a previous era, said post-moderns are often yearning for three things:

1. Community—a sense that in a fragmenting world and society they *belong* to a family.
2. Significance—a sense that they are meaningful, have *purpose*, and make a difference.
3. Transcendence—a sense or a connection with what is beyond immediate and material things and beings (Pocock, Van Rheen, and McConnell 2005, 116).

I added the italics to draw attention to the desire for belonging as well as purpose. They want a community where they can belong, like a family. They also want some significance where they find a purpose. In addition, they want transcendence where they're connected to something beyond just themselves and their own material world.

A more recent study was conducted by Beth Severson (2020) among emerging adults (ages 18-35) that found they will often come to faith by one of these three pathways:

1. They experience compelling *community*.
2. They *make a difference* through service or leadership.
3. They receive mentoring or leadership development.

Again, I added italics to emphasize the desire for belonging (community) as well as purpose (making a difference).

To summarize, those who are indifferent are often yearning for belonging with purpose. They want to belong to a community that feels like a family. In this community, they want to live for a purpose that is bigger than themselves in order to make a difference in the world. Since that is their yearning, perhaps that is the place God is already conversing with them, which indicates this is a good starting point. Is there any biblical precedent for this?

Indifference in Jesus' Day

The story of Zacchaeus in Luke 19 can be of help. He was a chief tax collector, which indicates he was not even allowed into the temple. As a result, he was indifferent to the religious system of his day. When Jesus encounters Zacchaeus and visits him at his house, Jesus did not discuss guilt, shame, or fear. Jesus brought the disciples with him. During that meal, Zacchaeus feels like he belongs in this community.

Experiencing a sense of belonging, Zacchaeus stands up and says, "Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the

amount” (Luke 19:8).

Jesus then quickly replies, “Today salvation has come to this house” (Luke 19:9). In other words, as Zacchaeus recognizes he belongs in this community, he is now given a new purpose for his life and work. This “belonging with purpose” is a good starting point for faith discussions with those who are indifferent. Figure 2 is revised to add this additional emerging worldview, as shown in Figure 5.

	Worldview			
	Guilt/Justice	Shame/Honor	Fear/Power	Indifference/ Belonging with Purpose
Typical location:	West (N. America, Europe)	East (Middle East, N. Africa, Asia)	South (sub-Saharan Africa, tribal, Caribbean)	Post-religious
Sin’s result:	guilt/separation	shame	fear/curse/bondage	indifference
Solution in Jesus:	payment/substitute	honor restored, cleansed	deliverance	belonging with purpose
Image of salvation:	courtroom/justice	relationship, cleansing	power, freedom	coming home
Relationship with God:	Judge who declares, “Not guilty!”	Father who restores honor	Creator who protects & delivers	Family who welcomes you home

Figure 5. *Evangelism and Four Worldviews*

To summarize these four worldviews, sin results in guilt, thus Jesus provides justice for those in the guilt/justice worldview. This is true and biblical, but it is not the whole part of the story. Sin also produces fear and Jesus provides the power of God for salvation for those in the fear/power worldview. In addition, sin produces shame and Jesus restores the honor of those in the shame/honor worldview by making them members of the family of God. In the right-hand column of Figure 5, I added the fourth emerging worldview that acknowledges that sin can also produce indifference. Like in Zacchaeus’ life, Jesus offers belonging with purpose. The image of salvation that corresponds to God’s conversation with those that are indifferent is of someone coming home. They may be coming

home to a family they had previously strayed from or to a family they never had but had always longed for. That's the image for those who are indifferent: Jesus invites them to come home to a community that offers purpose. That image is a starting point for conversation with those who are indifferent.

A Mixing Board

So how is this fleshed out? So far, I have discussed these four worldviews as discrete worldviews. In practice, they are often integrated. Oftentimes, people have one or two of these worldviews in their background. As you listen to them in conversations, you can discover which worldview is operating in order to know where to start gospel conversations. Along the way, you may notice another worldview, so you adjust, similar to moving the sliders on a mixing board that balances musical signals.

For example, when we were conversing with a millennial named Alice, she said, "You know, I used to go to a church, but it's been a long time, and didn't see the use of it." So we started to engage her in indifference by describing how Jesus offers belonging and purpose. After the conversation progressed for a while, she said, "Well, right now, I'm really involved in Wicca, and I hope that's going to help me."

At this point, the conversation moved over to the fear/power worldview. When someone is engaged in Wicca, it's usually not just due to curiosity. Oftentimes, there is something that's gripping them that they are hoping to overpower. It may be something as mundane as getting a date for Friday night, or maybe something more serious, like abuse in the home. They are often locked in fear and what they want to hear is not a Christ who simply offers justice, honor, or belonging. They are crying out for power to break free from what is locking them in fear. Eventually, the discussion gravitated toward the fear/power worldview and Alice was very interested to hear what we had to say. She eventually went to church with one of us. Figure 6 portrays how Alice is influenced by these two worldviews and how the discussion focused on the areas where God is having a conversation with her (not simply where God is conversing with me). Alice's example provides insight into personal conversations. But what about on a larger scale?

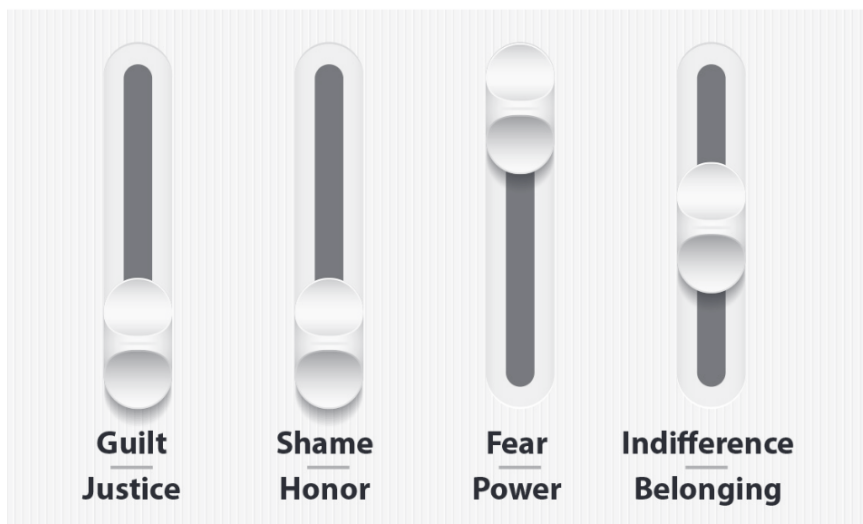


Figure 6. *The Influence of a Combination of Worldviews on Alice*

Chi Alpha at American University

If you have conversations with students at American University in Washington, DC, you will quickly realize that American University is not a hotbed of religious conservatism! Instead, students are often indifferent secularists. A Chi Alpha chapter (a student ministry associated with Assemblies of God) was formed to reach these students. Their website says, “Jesus. Purpose. Community.” They recognize that for the indifferent people whom they are engaging, a good starting point is belonging (community) with purpose. So here is how they embody this belonging with purpose.

Their biggest outreach occurs at the beginning of the year during Welcome Week. They train students that if someone recognizes seven people in a group, they feel like they belong. As soon as they meet somebody, they introduce that person to others in the Chi Alpha group. When newcomers connect with seven Chi Alpha folks, they start to feel like they belong to the community. In addition, they hosted racial reconciliation meetings on campus, which is one way to demonstrate their purpose. Incidentally, while the American University administration doesn’t often provide encouragement for the Chi Alpha group, they came to the Chi Alpha leadership to express their appreciation for the racial reconciliation meetings. No other group on campus has the racial or ethnic background to make it happen, nor did any have the desire or capacity to

make it happen.

The Chi Alpha focus for evangelism is to invite people into small groups so that people have a community to belong to, which often leads to belief. The Chi Alpha students made statements such as “Authenticity is so important,” “Christianity is not a ‘to do list’ or four steps,” “We moved away from the Four Spiritual Laws approach since it feels inauthentic and impersonal,” “Formulas feel like a fortune cookie,” and “People want genuine relationships with others and with God.” An AU student who is not yet a believer said, “When I think about people who are more religious than I am or if I were to have a reason to start going to church, it would be to have that sense of community. It’s one of my favorite things about the church.”

Let that sink in a bit. Here’s someone who is unchurched and indifferent. He is looking for belonging. He is longing for a community to belong where he feels like he has come home. What could a church look like that would recognize this emerging worldview of indifference/belonging with purpose and then engage them in Christian community?

Kahaila Coffee

In London, England, church planter Paul Unsworth said that 20,000 people come by his street every Sunday morning with no Christian witness at all. There’s somebody on the street corner talking about true Islam, so to speak, but there’s no Christian witness there. So, Paul opened Kahaila coffee shop that also offers deserts and sandwiches. Paul said, “I’ve had more spiritual conversations with people in a week than I had working in a church for a whole year...people that don’t know anything about Jesus.”

Paul uses this business as a venue for the church plant. This is an example of an entrepreneurial church plant (ECP; Moon & Long, 2018) where communities of Christ followers are formed among unchurched or de-churched people in the marketplace. For some like Paul, this means starting a business. For others, they use an existing business as a venue for the church plant. There are several examples of this throughout the world. Paul’s church gathers on Wednesday nights in the coffee shop space with about 35 people in attendance around 7 PM. Paul explained, “We need to find out how to form community. This is why we chose a coffee shop. It is a third space where people share life. We aim to build community in the café.”

As a result of the proceeds of the coffee shop, they are training and employing vulnerable women as well as setting up a safe home for women. Some of their proceeds are also used for a prison visitation ministry in the neighborhood. They have combined belonging with purpose in order to

address those who are indifferent. This is a starting point for Paul to catch up on conversations that God is having in the secular London culture.

The Next Step?

We have been discussing the emerging worldview of indifference and how Jesus offers belonging with purpose to those with this worldview as a starting point to discern how God has been speaking to them. It should be noted that this is a process; indifferent people coming to Jesus can take a fair amount of time. In empathetic dialogue, a question to consider is, “What is the next step for this person to come to faith?” As painful as it is to say, oftentimes their next step is not to invite them to a church. That’s hard to accept since I wish they would come to church right away. For those who are indifferent though, several smaller steps may be necessary before they will come to your church.

One student put it to me this way. Suppose there’s an imam who came to you and said, “I’d like you to come to my mosque on Friday. We have really good teaching that will help you and your family. We have a really nice building and lots of programs for the different needs of the community.” Would you go to worship at that mosque? I had to admit, there’s really nothing he could say that would get me into that mosque. That’s when the student said, “That’s how a lot of millennials feel about the church for various reasons.”

The question to ask about the indifferent group is not “How do we get them to a church right away?” A more strategic question may be, “What is their next step in faith?” We can often arrive at answers to this by considering:

1. How do we create community they can join?
2. How do we create a place where they can belong?
3. What larger purpose can we offer them?
4. How can we invite them into a larger story that has purpose beyond their individual smaller story?

Eventually, we pray they will become a part of the church, but it may take some time.

Conclusion

Sadhu Sundar Sing, a beloved Christian from India, told a story of a high caste man in India who collapsed from heat exhaustion while waiting on a railway station platform (Seamands, 1981). Somebody ran over quickly and took a cup, filled it with water, and offered it to the man.

He refused to drink it.

Even though he was thirsty, and he needed some water, he refused. They noticed he had his own cup on the seat. So, they took his cup, filled it with water, and offered it to him.

He drank all of it.

Then Sundar Sing would say to his audience, “This is what I have been trying to say to you missionaries from abroad. You have been offering the water of life to the people of India in a foreign cup, and we have been slow to receive it. If you will offer it in our own cup, we are much more likely to accept it.”

To reach those who are indifferent to the gospel, we need to engage in empathetic listening in order to catch up on God’s conversation with them. Instead of offering the gospel in the cup of the guilt/justice worldview, the emerging worldview of indifference/belonging with purpose is both biblical and more suited to their context. That is a cup that offers both refreshing water and satisfies their yearning.

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