

Articulating God's Truth in an Unbelieving Age

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With religious beliefs trending toward secularism, the Christian worldview is fast becoming irrelevant to many. Regrettably, popular culture has emerged as the basis of modern discourse and thought. How the church responds to these trends will greatly determine its impact for generations to come.

Pollsters such as Pew Research, Gallup, and Barna Group have studied the state of religiosity in the U.S. for years. Their findings consistently confirm religious affiliation and church membership are declining.

In August 2018, Pew Research reported that religious affiliation in the U.S. dropped to roughly 70%.

^[1] Those who do not identify with a particular religion—the unaffiliated—are comprised of atheists, agnostics, and “nones” (nothing in particular). Since the turn of the 21st century, religious affiliation has declined exponentially.

In March 2021, Gallup reported that U.S. church membership fell to an all-time low of 47%. ^[2] They note that while church membership held steady at 70% for many decades, it declined exponentially since the turn of the 21st century. This decline was uniformly observed across all age groups and denominations.

Finally, other studies indicate an inverse correlation between religious beliefs and education. Findings suggest the more people are educated, the less likely they are to believe in God and have traditional convictions on issues such as marriage, sexuality, and abortion. ^[3] ^[4]

These trends are most alarming among Millennials (1981-96). Based on Gallup's findings, 64% of Millennials do not belong to a church. Additionally, a 2015 Pew Research report indicates the number of Millennials who are religiously unaffiliated is approaching 40%. ^[5] ^[6]

When surveyed, Millennials indicated they are religiously unaffiliated because they question the rationality of many religious teachings (60%), disagree with the position churches take on social and

¹ **Why America's 'nones' don't identify with a religion**, Pew Research, August 8, 2018, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/08/08/why-americas-nones-dont-identify-with-a-religion>.

² **U.S. Church Membership Falls Below Majority for First Time**, Gallup, March 29, 2021, by [Jeffrey M. Jones](https://news.gallup.com/poll/341963/church-membership-falls-below-majority-first-time.aspx), <https://news.gallup.com/poll/341963/church-membership-falls-below-majority-first-time.aspx>.

³ **Religious Landscape Study**, Pew Research, Educational Distribution, <https://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/educational-distribution>.

⁴ **A Wider Ideological Gap Between More and Less Education Adults**, Pew Research, April 26, 2016, <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2016/04/26/a-wider-ideological-gap-between-more-and-less-educated-adults>.

⁵ **Millennials increasingly are driving growth of 'nones'**, Pew Research, May 12, 2015, By Michael Lipka, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/05/12/millennials-increasingly-are-driving-growth-of-nones>.

⁶ **Millennials' Religiosity Amidst the Rise of the Nones**, Gallup, October 29, 2019, by Frank Newport, <https://news.gallup.com/opinion/polling-matters/267920/millennials-religiosity-amidst-rise-nones.aspx>.

political issues (49%), and don't believe in God (37%).^[7] Essentially, Millennials have difficulty reconciling the doctrinal teachings of the church with cultural trends and modern science.

While these trends are unsettling, they provide greater opportunities for the church to speak into our secular culture and proclaim God's truth. In order to meet these challenges, the church must equip believers to engage with those outside the community of faith and articulate the truth claims of the Christian faith with clarity and respect.

Jesus took this approach when dealing with the Jewish leaders of his day. He frequently engaged with them on matters of religious doctrine and practice. He clarified their misconceptions by speaking the truth.

**Millennials are religiously unaffiliated because
they question the rationality of religious teachings,
disagree with churches on social and political issues,
and don't believe in God.**

How does the church adapt to these new realities? How can the church stay true to the Gospel message, and at the same time grow in its ability to engage with and love people who are far from God?

First, the church must engage with people on matters of Christian doctrine, specifically, the fundamental beliefs of the Christian faith. Based on survey findings, Christian doctrine is sorely misunderstood. People seem to struggle with a wide range of doctrinal issues such as the nature of God, the nature of evil, transcendent truth, and absolute morality to name a few.

Second, the church must engage with people on matters of Christian rationality, specifically, the plausibility of Christian beliefs. This encompasses both classical and evidential apologetics. People outside the community of faith need to know that modern science does corroborate the truth claims of the Christian faith, and that the Christian worldview is the best attested and most compelling explanation of the world around us.

**The church must equip believers
to engage with people and articulate the truth claims
of the Christian faith with clarity and respect.**

Here are six ways your church can minister to people in this age of unbelief.

PRAY CONTINUALLY

Prayer aligns our hearts and minds with the will of God. Praying "without ceasing" makes us aware of God's promptings throughout our day (1 Thessalonians 5:17). This posture of prayer enables us to listen intently to God's leadings and respond as He calls us into action.

First, we pray God develops within us hearts that are inclined toward those who are struggling, those who are confused, those who have strayed from the community of faith.

Second, we pray God provides opportunities for us to engage with people on spiritual matters. We pray God calls people to faith and reason. For unless God intervenes, our efforts are futile.

⁷ **Why America's 'nones' don't identify with a religion**, Pew Research, August 8, 2018, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/08/08/why-americas-nones-dont-identify-with-a-religion>.

As God answers prayer, He empowers us with the Holy Spirit as we pursue ministry opportunities.

SEEK PROACTIVELY

To seek proactively is to actively pray for opportunities to connect with people in need.

We seek because Jesus first sought us.

*For the Son of Man came to seek and
save those who are lost.*

Luke 19:10 (NLT)

Therefore, go and make disciples of all the nations.

Matthew 28:19 (NLT)

In these passages, Jesus identifies the missional purpose of the incarnation. He knows people today have strayed far from God and are not in the company of believers where they can experience the preaching of God's Word and the witness of God's people.

Jesus' imperatives are to GO and SEEK people. As with traditional missions, we must go and immerse ourselves in the world of others. The places we go are different and varied.

For some, the kitchen table is an important place to start. Our children desperately need to be grounded. They need to know with certainty that the truth claims of the Christian faith are true and defensible. They need to know and experience the Gospel.

For others, it is the people we encounter daily, our friends at school, our neighbors, our colleagues at work. These are people God has already placed in our path.

And finally, it may be the people in our social circles, our acquaintances. These are people God has already placed in our circle of influence.

As we seek, God makes us sensitive to the spiritual needs of others as we invite them to engage.

EQUIP INTENTIONALLY

Being prepared involves training. It also involves intentionality.

Peter exhorts Christians to be prepared with an answer and a reason.

*Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you
to give the reason for the hope that you have.*

But do this with gentleness and respect.

1 Peter 3:15 (NIV)

Essentially, Peter exhorts each of us to know *what* we believe and *why* we believe it, so we can respond readily with an answer and a reason, and not be caught off-guard.

A notable example of preparedness is found in John 9. When the Pharisees asked the blind man who Jesus was, he responded with an answer and two reasons (paraphrased): "I am certain he is a prophet sent from God because I am miraculously healed and because Jesus cannot possess the power of healing unless God were with him." The blind man's response was borne out of his miraculous encounter with Jesus and his basic knowledge of Judaism.

Likewise, we must be prepared to respond when others engage with us on spiritual matters. Knowing the whats and whys of the Christian faith enables us to respond confidently to the big questions of the faith such as the existence of God, the divinity and resurrection of Jesus, the inspiration and trustworthiness of the Bible, God's sovereignty, and man's free will, and evil and suffering.

As believers, we begin by knowing the Gospel and the Biblical narrative of redemption. As we gain confidence, we broaden our training to include basic Christian theology, and perhaps Christian apologetics.

To assist us, there is a wide range of training resources available. Books, podcasts, and videos authored by respected Christian theologians and scholars provide a foundational exegesis of God's truth. These are great companions to God's Word.

ENGAGE CONFIDENTLY

Once we are equipped to communicate God's truth with clarity, we engage confidently.

Paul desired to proclaim the Gospel with boldness. This is our desire as well.

*Pray for me, that words may be given to me
in opening my mouth boldly
to proclaim the mystery of the gospel.
Ephesians 6:19 (ESV)*

When we speak of engagement in this context, we are talking about building trusting relationships with others to lovingly share God's truth. The act of engagement involves both listening and speaking. First, we listen intently to others as they share their spiritual questions. Listening allows us to get to know the person behind the questions more deeply. Then, we respond as the Holy Spirit prompts.

One-on-one relationships are a wonderful way to engage with people. Often people are uncomfortable sharing in a group setting. One-on-one relationships enable us to minister to people who would otherwise not be willing to join a group.

Another way we engage with people is in Bible discussion groups. These groups create a forum in which participants can safely ask questions, seek Biblical answers, and learn from one another. They build communities of mutual trust and respect where people are welcomed and accepted.

As we engage with people, God's truth is proclaimed, and the fallacies of secular thinking are exposed.

COMMUNICATE RESPECTFULLY

Once we have engaged with people, we communicate in ways that respect where people are at on their spiritual journey. This involves sensitivity and graciousness. It also involves listening respectfully as people share their stories.

In 2 Timothy 2:24-25 (NLT), Paul instructs us to not be quarrelsome, but be "patient when instructing difficult people and those who oppose the truth." We always respond in love. We want to be careful not to disgrace our calling as Christ's ambassadors.

As we listen and communicate respectfully, people come to realize we genuinely care about them.

CONNECT STRATEGICALLY

And finally, once we have communicated God's truth, we strategically connect people to the local church where they can be disciplined.

As we interact with people, we can assess their spiritual needs and suggest next steps. For some, it may be challenging them to respond to the Gospel. For others, it may be asking them to consider joining a Bible study, affinity group, meeting with a pastor, or attending Sunday services.

Inviting people into Christian community enables them to experience the preaching of God's Word and the witness of God's people.

The activity of reaching all generations with God's truth is best summarized in Paul's second letter to Timothy.

***Gently instruct those who oppose the truth.
Perhaps God will change those people's hearts, and they will learn the truth.
Then they will come to their senses and escape from the devil's trap.
2 Timothy 2:25-26 (NLT)***

Paul's instruction to Timothy encourages us as we minister to the spiritual needs of our age. He emphasizes that God alone has the power to change the hearts and minds of people. Our responsibility is simply to clearly and graciously present God's truth. We are God's witnesses, God's spokespeople.

Paul also emphasizes that we must rely entirely on the Holy Spirit to open people's minds to see and understand God's truth. He alone convinces people that the truth claims of the Christian faith are reasonable to believe as "they come to their senses." Only then will people be rescued from Satan's deceptions and strongholds.



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