

Being Public with Our Faith



Tim Keller, September 2018

It is no surprise that every poll and study shows that over the past two decades there has been a steady increase in the number of Americans who say they are atheists, agnostics, religiously unaffiliated, or believe “nothing in particular.” Each generation—from Gen X to Millennials to ‘Gen Z’—are significantly less religious and less churchgoing than the generation before.

This should mean Christians talk more to their neighbors, colleagues, and friends about the reasons they believe, but that is not what is happening. A recent study commissioned by Lutheran Hour Ministries found that since 1993 the number of Christians who said “I believe every Christian has a responsibility to share their faith” and the number who said they would speak to others about the benefits of becoming a Christian has dropped precipitously (See *Spiritual Conversations in the Digital Age*, A Barna Report, 2018). So at a moment when there is more need for evangelism—sharing the good news about Jesus—there is less willingness to do it.

WHY?

There are many factors. First, talking about Christian faith is more complicated. A generation ago you could assume that the vast majority of people believed in a personal God, an afterlife, moral absolutes, the reality of their sin, and had a basic respect for the Bible. Christians routinely assumed the existence of these concepts (or “dots,”) and evangelism was mainly connecting the dots to show them their personal need for Jesus. But we can no longer assume that any of these basic ideas are common knowledge or, if they are, even acceptable. To talk about faith now entails working to establish very basic concepts before Jesus’ gift of salvation can have any meaning.

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Second, talking about the Christian faith is more difficult. In the past those who didn’t believe always granted that religion was a good thing for society though ‘not for me.’ But Christianity and religion in general is no longer accepted as a good influence in society or in individual lives. From the history of the church supporting slavery and religious wars to the current involvement of religious persons in politics, the flaws and sins of the Christian church are foregrounded in our culture. There is particular



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anger over traditional Christian views of sexuality. To talk about faith now means being peppered with hostile questions.

Third, younger adults especially have been told repeatedly that “no one has the right to tell others what to believe—so you should not be trying to convert anyone.” This very statement, of course, is self-contradictory, since it is doing the very thing it forbids. Nevertheless, it is a slogan with enormous cultural power and it is hard for younger Christians not to be swayed by it. In addition, Sherry Turkle, in her book *Reclaiming Conversation*, points to studies that show that the more people use social media, the less able they are to empathize or put themselves in another’s shoes, and the more unable they are to talk face to face with anyone who disagrees with them.

In short, doing evangelism today will take more patience, courage, and thoughtfulness than was needed a generation ago. And yet there is no substitute. Jesus told his disciples: “You will be my witnesses, in Jerusalem, in Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). In Acts 8:4 we are told that after the persecution in Jerusalem, all the Christians were scattered except the apostles and that they “evangelized wherever they went.” Obviously, all Christians are neither gifted nor called to do public speaking. It meant, and means, that every Christian talked to friends, neighbors, and colleagues about the gospel.

IN THE END

In the end, what we most need to be public about our faith is not more training (although that is highly recommended) but proper motivation arising from a grasp of the gospel, that we are sinners saved by grace. There are at least three major reasons for evangelistic unfruitfulness. There is a lack of sensitivity—countered by the humility that comes from knowing we are undeserving sinners. There is a lack of courage—countered by the boldness that comes from knowing we are unconditionally loved.

Finally there is indifference. We look around us and we see people struggling to find meaning, satisfaction, hope, confidence. The biggest reason we keep our mouths shut is that we are failing in love for them. But the gospel produces love (Galatians 5:6). Now you may say: “Well, yes, I see I *ought* to be that humble, that confident, that loving—but I’m not.” But see, you’ve confirmed the point. The problem is ultimately in our hearts, not in our lack of training or knowing how to answer all the questions.

Remember the woman of Samaria that Jesus met at the well. “Many of the Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman’s testimony” (John 4:39). Why? She had no training, but he had changed her with his mercy, and now she didn’t need to care what people thought. “Come,” she said, “See a man who knew all my failures and still loved me.” And they came. “They said to the woman, ‘We no longer believe just because of what you said; now we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this man really is the Savior of the world’” (John 4:42).

Lord Jesus, change our hearts so that we have the love for our sorrowing, perishing friends that will fuel our bold yet humble witness to the grace of God that can only be found in Jesus.