

Listening Well Through Interviews: An Outreach Approach to University Students in Europe

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As evangelical Christians, we take Jesus' Great Commission (Matt. 28:18-20; Mark 16:15; Luke 24:46-47; John 20:19-22; Acts 1:4-8) seriously. We desire to share the gospel and give the reason for the hope we have to those who do not know Christ yet (1 Pet. 3:15). How can we share the gospel with postmodern young people living in Europe in a way that they can meaningfully receive and appreciate it? I serve among university students studying in the Netherlands and have been exploring this question for the past five years. In what follows, I describe my approach to outreach among university students.

LISTENING WELL IS AN ACT OF LOVE

Once or twice a week, I go to university campuses in the Netherlands, to conduct a survey on students' values and views on religion. All too often, when we talk to people for the sake of evangelism, the initial small talk is treated merely as a prelude to sharing the gospel. But they can quickly tell if we are only interested in preaching to them, and they dislike it when they are treated as objects of evangelism. Therefore, when I interview students (mostly one student at a time), I listen attentively to what they have to say and ask follow-up questions. I ask questions because I truly wish to understand their thoughts and experiences regarding religion.

In fact, during the interviews, I spend about 80 percent of the time listening to students. This is because demonstrating sincere interest in people affirms their dignity. As Janet Dunn says, "listening affirms people. Indeed, it is one of the highest forms of affirmation. When we listen, we invite another person to exist."¹

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When we also look at the life of Jesus, we notice that he gave his full attention to people whenever he interacted with them (Matt. 8:5-13; Mark 5:25-34; 10:46-52; Luke 24:13-35; John 3:1-15; 4:1-26). Thus, another reason we are called to listen attentively and with care is that, by doing so, we reflect Christlikeness. In this regard, it is well to heed Dietrich Bonhoeffer's words:

*We do God's work for our brothers and sisters when we learn to listen to them. So often Christians, especially preachers, think that their only service is always to have to "offer" something when they are together with other people. They forget that listening can be a greater service than speaking. Many people seek a sympathetic ear and do not find it among Christians, because these Christians are talking even when they should be listening.*²

The first principle of outreach through interviews, then, is this: take a sincere interest in what people share with you, ask thoughtful questions, and learn from them. Luke Cawley concurs: "Don't judge people or place them in mental boxes. Instead, cultivate a genuine curiosity about them. God is already at work in their lives. Ask good questions and listen well to figure out what he's been doing with them."³

When someone identifies as an atheist, it does not necessarily mean that they are anti-religion. They may simply mean that they were not raised in a religious household. I have asked students claiming to be atheists if had they been raised in a religious household, they might have been religious, and some said yes. Thus, as Cawley notes, "It's only by listening to the individual we can move past simple categorizations and begin to grasp the nuances of what they really believe."⁴

BE A POSITIVE, HEALING AMBASSADOR OF CHRIST

Some people have a negative image of Christianity because they have been hurt by legalistic and judgmental "Christians," or they have seen hateful "Christians" on social media. Thus, one of my objectives when interviewing students on campus is to present a different image of Christians by being humble and respectful, and by demonstrating that not all Christians are like those they have encountered. In other words, "at least we can show we care and

1. Janet Dunn, "How to Become a Good Listener," Desiring God, last modified April 1, 1983, <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/how-to-become-a-good-listener>.

2. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, trans. Daniel W. Bloesch (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2015), 75.

3. Luke Cawley, *The Myth of the Non-Christian: Engaging Atheists, Nominal Christians and the Spiritual but Not Religious* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2016), 96.

4. Cawley, *The Myth of the Non-Christian*, 113.

open people's minds to the possibility that their past experience of church (and of Christians) may not be representative of the whole."⁵

Recently, I interviewed an Egyptian-Dutch gay student. He had rejected Islam because of his sexuality and also harbored deep anger and frustration toward Christians. During our 45-minute conversation, I mostly listened to his anger and frustration and sincerely apologized for the pain he had experienced. What was the result? Although I did not share the gospel with him during our conversation, when he saw me later that day, he smiled and waved at me. To quote Cawley again, "You would be surprised how helpful it can be to say to someone with unpleasant church experiences, 'I am so sorry that the church, of which I am a part, has done this.' Our personal ownership of what happened to them often opens the door to their healing."⁶

So often, we feel compelled to proclaim the whole gospel to someone in a single setting, but it is important to remember that each of us is only one link in the chain of a person's salvific journey (1 Cor. 3:5-7). We do not need to share everything in a single encounter, because we can trust that the Lord will send others to continue drawing that person to himself.

SHARE A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE

I am always amazed that, when I show sincere interest in what students say and ask good questions, they begin to trust me as a person within as little as 10 minutes. Once trust is established, it becomes much easier and more natural to share my own Christian perspective. As David Mathis says, "Sometimes good listening only listens, and ministers best by keeping quiet, but typically good listening readies us to minister words of grace to precisely the place where the other is in need."⁷

It's only by listening to the individual we can move past simple categorizations and begin to grasp the nuances of what they really believe. Consider what might be his tone of voice and manner.

One of the questions I ask when I interview students is: "Do you have any questions to ask religious people out of curiosity? I am a Christian myself. Do you have

any questions to ask a Christian?" (see APPENDIX 1 for the list of questions I use for a survey). When students raise questions about religious issues, I always ask permission first before sharing my Christian perspective. Because the outreach takes the form of an interview and students generously give their time to answer my questions, I always keep in mind to be respectful and to avoid getting into an argument. Another thing to honestly ask ourselves is: What is my motivation behind sharing a Christian perspective? Do I seek to help the person I am talking with come one step closer to Christ? Or do I want to prove that their understanding of Christianity is wrong? In this regard, it is well to ponder Madeleine L'Engle's words: "*We do not draw people to Christ by loudly discrediting what they believe, by telling them how wrong they are and how right we are, but by showing them a light that is so lovely that they want with all their hearts to know the source of it.*"⁸

Furthermore, it is best not to overwhelm people with more knowledge than they can handle at a time, but rather to share "only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen" (Eph. 4:29). Whatever we share, we are to speak "the truth in love" (Eph. 4:15) and let our conversation be "always full of grace, seasoned with salt" (Col. 4:6). Finally, as Cawley says, "Think about what Jesus would say to each person. Consider what might be his tone of voice and manner. Ensure that your interactions with others don't just mention Jesus but instead reflect his character and attitude."⁹ Evangelism is not just about sharing who Jesus is and what he has done for us. We are called to grow in Christlikeness if we are to "reflect his character and attitude" when we talk about him.

DRAW PEOPLE TO CHRIST

When I interview students, I usually ask them this question: "Have you seen a picture or a statue of Jesus hanging on a cross? What do you think it symbolizes?" I slightly alter the question when I talk to Muslim students: "One of the differences between Christianity and Islam is that we believe that Jesus died on the cross. Do you know why his crucifixion is central to our faith?" These are non-coercive ways to share the gospel with students (again, I always ask permission before explaining the significance of the cross of Christ to them). To Muslim students, we can share that Jesus' dying on the cross was not an ad hoc event but the ultimate fulfillment and culmination of the Mosaic sacrificial system (Heb. 10:1-18). My desire when sharing the gospel with Muslim students is a rather modest one: it is not to convince them of the truth of the gospel in a single conversation; rather, I want them to see that what Christians believe is actually consistent with the grand biblical narrative.

5. Cawley, *The Myth of the Non-Christian*, 78.

6. Cawley, *The Myth of the Non-Christian*, 182.

7. David Mathis, "Six Lessons in Good Listening," *Desiring God*, last modified April 3, 2014, <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/six-lessons-in-good-listening>.

8. Madeleine L'Engle, *Walking on Water: Reflections on Faith and Art* (Wheaton, IL: Harold Shaw Publishers, 1980), 122.

9. Cawley, *The Myth of the Non-Christian*, 96.

Another question I ask is: “Suppose God exists. If God were a personal being who loves you unconditionally, never gives up on you, and will always be there for you to overcome difficulties, how would you feel?” I get a range of responses, from “I would feel safe and happy” to “It wouldn’t make much difference.” I always affirm those who give a positive response by saying, “I believe that God loves you unconditionally.”

The final question I ask is: “Have you ever read the Bible? Would you be interested in reading it?” Over the last five years, I have interviewed 1,086 people, and 310 of them received a Bible. This means that approximately one Bible was distributed for every 3.5 conversations! During their years in the university, I maybe the only Christian some of the students might have encountered. Thus, I find it vital to pray for the students I have interviewed, especially those who received a Bible. There are days (though not often) when I do not meet any student who shows interest in reading the Bible. At such times, I take comfort in reminding myself of Cawley’s words:

“It’s not your responsibility to convert people any more than it is your job to stand all day with your hand in a flowerpot trying to make tulip bulbs blossom. Yet, even if you don’t physically make plants grow, you can still encourage or inhibit their development. Watering and planting matter. You have some influence. The greater part of the work is with God. But not one ounce of energy you put into making Jesus known is ever wasted.”¹⁰

APPENDIX 1 QUESTIONS USED IN THE SURVEY

1. What are you studying, and what would you like to do in the future?
2. Aristotle said, “Educating the mind without educating the heart is no education at all.” Would you agree? How would you educate your heart?
3. Are there any big issues in society that you are concerned about?
4. What are the values that you consider important? What kind of person would you like to become?
5. “We have a lot of understandings in our culture of what makes a life successful or prosperous. But we’ve lost some of the understanding of what makes a life good” (Susan Phillips). What, in your opinion, makes a life good?
6. Do you think a lot about spiritual things or religion? If you are religious, how important is it to you?
7. Why do you think some people are drawn to religion? What attracts them to religion?
8. Do you have any question to ask religious people out of curiosity?
9. Do you ever pray? What do you pray about? To whom or what are you praying?

10. What do you think was the point of Jesus’ life and teachings? What did he want to accomplish?
11. Have you seen a picture or a statue of Jesus hanging on a cross? What do you think it symbolizes?
12. If you could sit with Jesus over a cup of coffee and ask him anything, what would you ask him?
13. Suppose God exists. If God were a personal being who loves you unconditionally, how would you feel?
14. Have you ever read the Bible? Would you be interested in reading it?

APPENDIX 2 A SUMMARY OF A RECENT OUTREACH

One of the students I spoke with was Hannah (not her real name) from the Netherlands. She was very friendly and open to conversation, and we ended up talking for over an hour. She shared a lot about herself, and at first, I was struck by how much she had already accomplished. She has a heart for children struggling with learning, and volunteers every Sunday to help them. She has lived in Bali and Morocco, where she visited Hindu temples and mosques. After returning from Morocco, she opened a Moroccan restaurant with Muslim partners. She is also a classical ballet dancer who performs once a year. Her dream is to become a mayor, and she is currently part of the youth group of a political party.

When I asked Hannah if there was anything she wanted to ask a Christian, she was curious about heartwarming experiences I had as a believer. I shared that when we lost our first child, or when my wife was diagnosed with breast cancer, people supported us through prayer. I told her that I was especially grateful to a Christian couple and our church leaders who came to our house to pray for my wife’s healing during her battle with cancer. This reminded Hannah of a friend who had recently become Catholic. When Hannah’s grandmother became seriously ill, she moved in to take care of her until she passed away. During that time, her Catholic friend and her church were praying for her grandmother, and Hannah was clearly touched by their gesture of love.

As our conversation continued, Hannah shared that her mother had struggled with alcohol addiction but had been set free after attending church and becoming a Christian. Although her mother is no longer an active believer, Hannah attended church with her for four years during her early teens. Yet she had never understood why Jesus died on the cross. When I explained it to her, I could see that it resonated deeply in her heart. Earlier that day, I had shared the same message with another Dutch student, but her response had been very different from Hannah’s.

When I asked Hannah if there was anything she would like to ask Jesus if he were sitting with us, she paused to think. With tears in her eyes, she said, “I want to know if my sister could find happiness.”

¹⁰ Cawley, *The Myth of the Non-Christian*, 207-208.

At first, I had thought everything was going well in Hannah's life, but now I could see that it was also marked by brokenness. After asking if she would like a Bible and giving it to her, I told her I wanted to pray for her sister. I asked if there was anything else I could pray for, and she shared that she wanted to study in Asia. "I want to take my sister there. That'll be her only chance," she said, implying something serious about her sister's situation. I prayed for both Hannah's study plans and her sister.

As our conversation came to an end, Hannah asked why I was doing this. I explained, "I work for a Christian student organization, and I'm curious to hear students' views on religion and the beliefs they hold." She smiled and said, "You do amazing work!"

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