

God's Word in God's World (Engaging Secular People in Scripture)

Lausanne Orthodox Initiative Consultation

Scott Ross | 2022 Jun 15

Helpful Links:

<https://sotb.research.bible>

<https://thechangemakersproject.org>

<https://faithandliberty.org>

<https://traumahealinginstitute.org>

Ron's Story

In the early 1970s, Ron was living homeless in the hills above Santa Barbara, CA. He was in his early 20's and had hitchhiked across the country from Florida where he had dropped out of college and left what little family he had – looking for more – not knowing what 'more' was. He had picked up various names along his journey – Guru, because he was pre-disposed to talk about spiritual things: Rooftop Ronnie, because he had, for a while lived on the roof of a home – his diet mainly consisting of the avocados that came from the branches hanging over the roof.

Somehow his travels led him to a build a camp in the mountains above Santa Barbara. He was homeless, hungry, weary, un-showered, mentally ravaged, empty and without hope.

He would regularly go down to the beach and dig through garbage cans looking for food. Anything to keep him alive and quiet the hunger pangs. Half a sandwich here, a piece of old fruit there.

Well one day, while digging through the garbage, Ron saw a small booklet amongst the trash. Thinking it might be something to read through later – to keep his mind busy, he pulled it out and put it with the bits of food he had collected. All it said on the cover was ‘Gospel of John.’

Eventually Ron made his way back into the hills, back to his camp and began to eat his scraps of food.

He also pulled out the little booklet and began reading. As he read something began to happen to him. He read about the Word becoming flesh and dwelling among us, and God loving the world so much that he gave his only Son, and Jesus saying things like, ‘I am the Way, the Truth and the Life.’ He suddenly somehow just ‘knew’ he’d found what he had been longing for. He found hope. He found purpose. He found Jesus.

I don’t know all of the details of how he got his life together. But what I can tell you is that about 6 years later, after he finished Bible college, he married my sister, then a few years later graduated from Princeton Seminary, planted two churches, pastored another and continues (now in his mid-seventies) to preach the Great News of Jesus from the Bible every Sunday in a small church that currently meets in their home.

But what is of primary significance to me is that Ron was one of the most influential people in my journey with Jesus and just the right time in my life. He introduced me to engaging with the Bible.

And as a result, I ended up graduating from seminary, becoming a church planter and pastor for 25 years before joining the work of American Bible Society.

Introduction

Today, I'm privileged to begin our conversation about engaging secularized people with Word of God.

I share this story about my brother-in-law for two reasons: First, before his miraculous encounter with Jesus through the Gospel of John, I'm not sure you could find a more secular person. He wasn't 'anti-God.' He just had no framework for understanding of God and little to no connection to the Bible. Yet, at the same time, I've not heard a clearer, more compelling testimony of God's Spirit at work transforming a human being as they simply engage with the Bible.

Someone not looking for God found the God they weren't looking for and realized it was the God they had always been longing for.

Clearly not every story is going to be as dramatic as his. In fact, in my experience, very few have that kind of radical life transformation in such a short time simply from reading the Bible. Most people experience the life-transforming power of the Gospel found in Scripture through either engagement with the Bible through connection to a church or through a personal friendship or family member (like my relationship with Ron) that people experience the life-transforming power of the Gospel found in Scripture.

Second, I also share this story because the country in which I live is now considered a post-Christian or 'secular' nation – like so many others in the northern hemisphere. It is a nation in dire need of these kinds of God-encounters, whether instantaneously through Scripture portions found in garbage cans, or over a period of time through authentic relationship with God's people and connection to His Church. And I believe the times in which we live are ripe for both immediate and long-term relational life transforming encounters.

So, what I want to do in the next few minutes is to define (from an admittedly American perspective – although, I assume there is overlap in other countries) who are the ones we consider secularized, what challenges they are facing, opportunities we’re exploring or implementing as we try to serve churches, and a word of hope for ongoing collaborative opportunities. We are truly facing strong headwinds but, historically that is when the Church usually shines brightest.

(Parenthetically, when we use the term Scripture Engaged at American Bible Society, we’re talking about people who regularly read the Bible in such a way that it influences their choices and shapes their relationships with God and others.)

Who are Secularized People?

We could spend the entire consultation discussing this topic but since time is limited, I’ll just give a broad definition. Secularized people are those whose interests, attitudes, and activities, have no religious or spiritual basis. God isn’t relevant in their everyday lives. And what we see in our State of the Bible research is that there is a spectrum of how secularized people are as it relates to Bible engagement. These people fit into 3 general categories:

1. **Hostile** – Our research shows that only about 15% of Americans believe the Bible was written to control people and because of that, harbor ill feelings toward it and those who promote it. This is actually good news. It means that more than 8 in 10 people are not hostile toward the Bible. The bad news is that this group is slowly growing.

2. **Indifferent** – This group consists of those who have almost no interaction with the Bible outside of accidental encounters – weddings, funerals, verses that have become cultural idioms (E.g. Do unto others as you'd have them do unto you.). They're not hostile, they're just clueless. This groups is growing faster that we'd like to see.
 - a. These first two groups we call 'Bible Disengaged.' But there's a third group of 'secular people' we call the 'Movable Middle.'
3. **Curious** – This group makes up about 66 million Americans. They are interested but not connected to God's Word. They might not believe it. They may own a Bible or two but they never read it. They'll drive by a church on a Sunday morning and wonder what's going on in there. Or, they have some kind of church experience in their past or a Christian family member or friend. For our context, this is a primary target as we think about helping them connect with the Bible. Unfortunately, this group is down 40% from just a year ago.

What's more disheartening is the speed at which those previously connected to churches are becoming secularized. Much of the global north has been experiencing this for decades:

- Church membership and attendance has been plummeting.
- Increasingly people view the Bible as archaic, and irrelevant.
- Each year, fewer people are turning to the Bible for hope and are instead looking to media outlets and social platforms for truth, hope, and even community.

Although there was a spike in people interested in engaging with the Bible at the beginning of the pandemic, the overall trajectory of Bible engagement and Bible interest is continuing a 12 year decline. According to our latest survey, those who are Scripture engaged is down to 19% (a drop of 15 million).

We attribute some of the drastic nature of the recent decline is in part due to the pandemic's lingering results. People do not read the Bible simply to feel better about themselves or to feel closer to God. Our research tells us that when people read the Bible, they are often looking to experience God's calling to engage in His mission - to give generously of their time and resources; to serve others; to worship, pray and grow; to experience reconciliation with God and others – all in community. And the pandemic frustrated much of that.

People found it hard to live out their faith. It became difficult to connect the Bible to daily life. Scripture engagement felt like more of a chore. And people felt less connected to community, activity, and transformation.

What's interesting is that amid all of this, we are seeing new opportunities for Bible engagement emerge - opportunities that can meet people in their deepest needs.

What Challenges are Secularized People Facing?

Let me just start with a few words and see if we can begin to understand what our secular friends and neighbors are facing: Covid 19; war; terror; floods; famine; tornados; hurricanes; fires; economy; social unrest...

Or to be specific to my local context: Buffalo, NY; Uvalde, TX; Marshall Fire, Boulder, CO; George Floyd; gas and food prices; food prices; hate crimes; political polarization...I could go on.

We are built with an innate desire for ‘Shalom’ – peace; provision; justice; safety; hope; love - in all areas of life, and it seems every last bit of shalom we have left is being stripped away.

At best, these issues are difficult for Christians, who have connection to God, hope and a solid foundation in God’s Word from which to approach life. Those without a solid biblically informed framework that helps connect them to God the Father, through Christ, empowered by the Holy Spirit, are left to navigate these challenges on their own. They are drifting without hope, comfort, peace, or any real anchor.

Even if these people wanted to find comfort, hope, and help in the pages of Scripture, they tell us they wouldn’t know where to begin. About 30% of curious non-Bible users tell us they simply ‘don’t know where to start.’ And it’s frustrating for them. This is especially true for younger generations.

If people don’t know where to start, they most likely won’t turn to the Bible in their day-to-day lives - let alone during times of fear, stress, suffering, or confusion.

(What I have seen in my work as a volunteer fire chaplain for our local fire department is that, while people may not know where to start or how to engage with the Bible, they know it is important at some level. I see many who end up using it as a good luck charm. In fact, we rarely have people turn down Bibles, especially if the cover resonates with them – like our First Responder Bibles. I gave one of these Bibles to our chief – who I would call a neo-secular – and although I don’t think he’s opened it, he displays it proudly and prominently on a small desk in his office.)

So let me share a few thoughts on how we're inviting secular people to engage with Scripture in business, community, and church spheres.

Opportunities and Implementation

I love the account in Acts 17, where Paul is in Athens gathered with the local philosophers. These people were the secular of his day. He went to where they were, giving them homefield advantage. Then he used something they could connect with – an idol to an unknown God – to introduce them to Jesus.

It's my belief that God always provides connecting dots that lead broken, hurting, confused, marginalized, and alienated people to Him. We just need to look for them.

Let me share three ways we're trying to help our secularized connect the dots and meet Jesus through engagement with the Bible.

1. **The Disenchanted** – (what many call the 'nones' – no religious affiliation) Millions of folks in our communities are disenchanted with the Christianity they know...or think they know. Many come from a Christian heritage and may even consider themselves 'Christian' loosely (although that title is quickly disappearing), but as they've grown into adulthood, they have become disinterested in connection to their religious background. But, because of their connections to someone in their past like grandma and her deep faith, they remember it with a sense of wistfulness. And even though they may be disenchanted with Christianity, they still want to make a difference in the world – holding on to some of the values found in the Bible.

- a. What if we could help these folks re-engage with the ‘faith of their ancestors’ even in a small way; helping them take their next step in their journey to God through the Bible.
 - b. We’re just beginning to develop this arena of thought. This spring, we piloted an initiative that convened business, government and church leaders to discuss what it means to be a ‘changemaker’ in secular industries like banking, franchise restaurants, entertainment and more. Our aim is to help people connect their desire to make a difference with the guiding wisdom of Scripture, which has helped Christians across history transform their families and cultures.
2. **The Curious** – One fascinating opportunity we’re seeing in the secular community is an openness to discussing spiritual things. Since many secular people view all beliefs as equal, they don’t see the Bible as a threat to their way of life. In fact, our surveys show that many young people are curious and 9 out of 10 non-practicing Christians (neo-secular or ‘nones’) want to know more.
- a. If (like Paul’s experience in Athens) we can help churches connect with these curious people in their space, on their terms - without judgment and without guile – in order to guide them toward biblically centered relationships, experiences, and resources, it’s entirely possible we’ll see an increase in Bible-engaged disciples whose faith living and dynamic.
 - b. We also want to provide opportunities for curious people to discover the Bible in their own communities.

- c. Last year American Bible Society opened the Faith and Liberty Discover Center. It's in the very heart of the birthplace of our nation – historic Philadelphia. It's a standing invitation for all people to come and engage with 5 very important themes we value as a nation – Faith, Liberty, Justice, Hope and Unity, all themes found throughout the Bible. The experience introduces guests to changemakers in our nation's history who were influenced by the Bible in their work. It also offers an honest look at how people have wrongly used the Bible to separate, segregate and enslave. Along their way through the exhibits, guests use a 'lamp' to digitally collect articles of interest that are compiled into a personalized website. This way, guests can continue exploring Biblical themes in greater detail, even after the visit.
 - i. Our desire is that it invite the curious into a conversation around the value of engaging with in the Bible.
3. **The Traumatized:** Meeting people in their suffering. This is the topic that excites me the most because we are seeing significant progress and impact in this area. About 70% of Americans have experienced at least one traumatic event in their lifetime according to last year's State of the Bible. This doesn't include the various forms of trauma and secondary traumas we've all experienced through the pandemic and other recent world events. We see people in pain looking for something bigger than their circumstances to give them relief, comfort, hope and healing. This seems to be a global reality.

- a. What happens when we start a Bible-centered conversation around trauma and suffering?
- b. Some of you may be familiar with the *Healing the Wounds of Trauma* small group Bible study stewarded by American Bible Society. The program began 20 years ago in the Democratic Republic of Congo to help pastors and their churches address their own trauma amid the devastating aftermath of war.
- c. Since its beginning, this Bible-based program has expanded to approximately 116 countries and has over 16,000 trained facilitators from most expressions of the global Church.
- d. What is truly amazing about this program is that it not only reduces symptoms of trauma, but it also helps people without prior relationship with God to engage with the Bible and begin their journey of faith in Jesus.
- e. We have developed additional ‘entry-level’ resources that help suffering people begin to address their pain with Scripture portions.
- f. One resource, *Beyond Disaster*, (which providentially arrived in our warehouse 4 weeks before the start of the pandemic) is currently available in 17 languages online and is being used as a great conversation starter around the world.
 - i. In the US alone, we’ve given out over 200,000 copies through ministry partners. They’ve been distributed in food boxes, after natural disasters, and even after recent mass shootings.
 - ii. You may have heard about the Marshall Fire in Boulder, Colorado, in late December last year. It burned down about

1,000 homes and is the most expensive fire in Colorado history. A few days after the fire, I went to an aid center to meet with one of our ministry partners. I was in my fire chaplain uniform and carrying a few of *Beyond Disaster* booklets. As I was waiting for my ministry partner to arrive a gentleman walked up to me and asked if he could have one of the booklets for his wife. He said he thought she'd appreciate it. As we began talking, it became clear that they were experiencing severe trauma after losing everything. They were still in shock and trying to figure out how to begin rebuilding their lives. They were desperate for something to connect them to something/someone bigger than their circumstances.

- g. Our ministry partners in the Ukraine are reporting the same kinds of stories. People in crisis are looking for Scripture. We're told that people are just as eager to receive the "Bread of Life" as they are physical bread. In the middle of devastating war, people are engaging with God's Word and receiving hope.

We see this task of meeting suffering people with the hope found in the Bible as one of our most important and impactful areas of ministry focus. We aim to continue growing the Bible-based trauma healing program over the next decade.

Opportunities for Collaboration

Finally, I'll just say a word about collaboration. One reason I've been excited to participate in this gathering is because we know we need each other.

No one of us has the 'silver bullet' for getting secular people engaged in the Bible. I need to hear where you see God's hand at work in this area to discern if it's something that would serve churches in the US. And I hope what I've shared has begun to stir creative thoughts that can be useful in your context.

I recently had the privilege of participating in one day conference in Philadelphia, that gathered leaders from non-profit, for profit, educational institutions, and local church pastors. Our objective was to explore how to disrupt the current cultural trajectory away from the Bible and encourage deep, meaningful Scripture engagement, and to share one method that could help encourage deep, meaningful Scripture engagement.

What encouraged me the most was the interest and participation of young pastors and leaders from many theological backgrounds who are in trenches day in and day out. They are thinking creatively about how to meet people on their terms, in their space and in their pain. They aren't afraid of the discomfort or conversations not going the way they want, because they trust in the goodness and the greatness of God to change hearts – sometimes in a moment (like my brother-in-law) and often through relationship with other Christians and God's Church.

All people, sacred or secular (a false dichotomy since all bear the image of God), long for the same thing – whether they know it or not. We want to experience full and abundant life, to know that the future is secure, and to connect deeply with one another. We know that these desires can only be fulfilled in Jesus Christ. Through him, we are made fully alive; we receive the

security of God's promises in Scripture; and we are brought into the eternal family of his Church. And all that begins with engaging with the Bible!

May we keep in step with the Spirit as we do our part to help people make that connection.

Thank you.

Small Group Questions:

1. How is the Bible viewed in your culture? What are secular people saying about the Bible?
2. What do you see as the greatest challenges to secular people engaging with Scripture in general?
3. What are unique challenges secularized people in your local communities?
 - a. How does the Bible speak to those challenges and what are the possible forums 'on their turf' where the Church can engage them with the Bible?
4. What national values from your country of residence express themes found in the Bible?
5. What used to work but doesn't any longer?
6. What successes can you share?