

## **Pathway to Jesus: Crossing the thresholds of faith**

Don Everts and Doug Schaupp

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Don Everts and Doug Schaupp are senior leaders of evangelistic work amongst students in North America. They have long experience of helping young adults explore and find faith in today's changing culture.

### ***Description***

In today's postmodern culture, people come to Jesus in a wide variety of ways. If conversion ever was a mechanical, linear process, it is so no longer. Yet neither is it a nebulous spiritual wandering that never culminates in decision and commitment. Don Everts and Doug Schaupp have listened to the stories of two thousand postmodern people who have come to follow Jesus. While their stories are very different, certain common themes emerge. Postmodern evangelism may be a mysterious and organic process, but it also goes through common and discernible phases, as people cross thresholds from distrust to trust, from complacency to curiosity and from meandering to seeking. The authors describe the factors that influence how people change their perspectives and become open to the gospel. They provide practical tools for helping people enter the kingdom, and guidelines for how new believers can live out their Christian faith.

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### **A postmodern path to faith**

A summary article of the book by the authors, Don Everts and Doug Schaupp

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I can remember that afternoon as if it was yesterday. I (Doug) was standing out in the middle of the green grass of the park, singing as loudly as I could. Twenty of my Christian friends and I were holding guitars and singing to 'witness' to the people who lounged nearby on the sunny patches of grass. We wanted to show our neighbours our authentic joy and love for Jesus. What better way to witness than with bold worship?

And did we grow that day! This unforgettable moment was a profound faith experience for all of us who were willing to be 'fools for Christ'. We stood publicly and shamelessly for the gospel. Our faith was tested and affirmed. But for those who were trying to catch some rays on the lawn - well, no-one was curious about issues of faith after our public spectacle. Instead of being attractive or intriguing witnesses for Christ, we were just one more random thing in their day, it seemed.

Our bold worship had grown our faith, but it made for weak evangelism. Our fatal flaw? We came up with our evangelistic strategy while we were alone in a room together with a bunch of Christians. Not once in our brainstorming and planning did we ask where our non-Christian neighbours were coming from. Not once did we try to find out what they might need to take a step towards Jesus. We were mostly coming up with something we wanted to do, not something that would actually be helpful to those unsuspecting sunbathers on the grass. I'll never forget that afternoon.

Over the past twenty years, we have had many such awkward moments as we learned, helter-skelter, to walk the path of faith with our sceptical and cynical friends. Since that worship-on-the-grass event God has granted us the humbling privilege of walking the journey of faith with over 2,000 people who were once lost, but now are followers of Jesus. Seeing all these conversions is exhilarating and humbling because we clearly remember all the inglorious (and even embarrassing) moments that were part of the learning journey. But seeing all these people coming to faith in Jesus has done something else to us as well: it has taught us about conversion.

Somewhere along the line we started asking the questions we never asked before going to the park that afternoon: What is it like for those who are lost to take steps towards Jesus? And how can we truly be helpful to them on that journey? There are two foundational truths about conversion that all these new believers have taught us over the years, two foundational truths about what it's like to become a Christian in this postmodern age.

### ***It's mysterious***

The first lesson they have taught us about the path to faith is that it is, in the end, mysterious. Again and again we found ourselves marvelling at transformations that we never would have anticipated and shaking our heads in frustration at those who seemed near to faith but never got there. The gospel seeds that had been planted in some grew in spite of the weakness of our efforts. Other seeds which we tended with great care never took root. Ultimately, the postmodern path to faith is a mystery. It reminds us of the truth in Jesus' parable in Mark 4:26-27: 'This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how' (TNIV).

As kingdom farmers in this postmodern soil, we must welcome the mysterious nature of that path to faith. In fact, there is something spiritually liberating when we admit and declare what is beyond us and where we are powerless. We cannot create life. It is impossible for us to predict why some of our friends will choose for Jesus and why others just won't. We don't know how to change hearts. We don't know which seed will take root and which will bounce off the hardened ground.

This lesson has freed us from the modern temptation to view conversion as mostly a psychological phenomenon, a psychological occurrence that can be controlled, manipulated and triggered if we preach the gospel just right, sing the worship songs loud enough, and dim the lights at just the right time. If conversion were psychological and controllable by humans, we'd be under a lot of pressure to get it done!

Our friends have reminded us that conversion is much more soul-deep and mysterious than that. The path to faith is mysterious. To admit that is liberation. The weight is off our back and onto God's, where it belongs. The Scriptures teach us that God is ultimately in control of salvation. No-one, Jesus reminded his followers, can come all the way down the path to Jesus unless God calls them ( John 6:44, 65).

When we plan outreach events, when we pray for our neighbours, when we consider whether to answer honestly the friend who asks about why we serve the poor, let us learn from the farmer in the parable. Let us look the seed in the eye and say, 'You are a mystery to me. I am about to throw you out there, but I still don't know how you really work.' This is the first thing we have to learn from our new

brothers and sisters about the postmodern path to faith in Jesus. It is an important lesson to learn. It is essential to hold onto this truth because it is so tempting to grasp for control. Instead of living in this freeing biblical truth, we are often tempted to try to predict, reduce and control the mystery.

In order to keep embracing the truth of the mystery of conversion, we need to beware of declarations of certainty: This is how to programme evangelism . . . This is how to share the gospel . . . This is how to reach seekers today . . . The postmodern new believers we've walked alongside would warn us against such declarations. Heeding this lesson, we choose humbly to embrace the mystery of conversion like the farmer in the parable.

### ***It's organic – five seasons***

The second lesson this group of new believers has shown us is that the postmodern path to faith is organic. As we sat and listened to their stories we were struck immediately by the mystery, but also by the similar seasons of growth through which each of them went. There were five distinct seasons, in fact. These were what we came to call 'The Five Thresholds'. While this second lesson surprised us, we have found it to be an equally important lesson to learn.

Remember how Jesus' parable ends? 'The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come' (Mark 4:28-29 NRSV). Heeding their lesson, we are able to recognize the different stages of growth (seed, stalk, head, full grain, ripe) and seek to love our non-Christian friends wisely and sensitively, adjusting to where they are in their growth.

The farmer in the parable can see the different stages of growth and act accordingly. Seeing this organic nature of heading to Jesus has freed us from the temptation to see conversion as primarily binary. If our most sophisticated understanding of the path to faith says that our neighbour is either a Christian ('on') or not a Christian ('off'), then we tend to have just as unsophisticated a response to them. If they aren't a Christian, well, it's time to pull out our evangelism shotgun to try to force the switch to the 'on' position. That's what it means to 'do evangelism', after all (which tends to explain why we so rarely engage in evangelism).

But just as no farmer would spend all her time scattering seeds, or all his time swinging a sickle, we see such one-size fits-all evangelism as foolish spiritual farming. There are five distinct seasons of growth that we've noticed again and again. Realizing this organic way in which people travel down the path to faith frees us to respond to our friends' particular needs at the time. While the one-size-fits-all evangelists annoyed our friends, they've also told us that they never would have travelled all the way to Jesus if someone hadn't come along and helped them with the different parts of the journey they were on.

But if the path to faith really is organic, if there really are five distinct thresholds along the way to faith in Jesus, then is it really mysterious? Is conversion mysterious or organic?

### ***It's both***

In the end, the path to Jesus is both mysterious and organic. Back to Jesus' whole parable:

*This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. All by itself the soil produces grain - first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head. As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come* (Mark 4:26-29 TNIV).

This image Jesus paints is full of tension, isn't it? At the same time it underlines the mysterious, uncontrollable nature of conversion (the farmer sleeps and yet the seed grows in ways he can't understand) and the need for work (scattering seeds, harvesting with the sickle). While it affirms the

hidden nature of change (it happens at night when no-one is looking), it also shows the natural, organic process that change follows (first seed, then stalk, then head, then the crop is ready). The growth of the plant may be mysterious, but it still follows nature. It is organic, and this means that for the seed to become a ripe plant, it will grow in a certain way.

This was the lesson our friends were teaching us. Each individual path to faith was a unique mystery, but their collective paths to faith had surprising similarities. These tremendous people who once were so jaded about Christianity and who are now dedicated believers have told us, in surprising unison, that the path to faith is both mysterious and organic. So their stories place us in a tension. How do we stand in awe of the mysterious growth while at the same time we help them to the next natural threshold along the path? Well, living in that tension is what the Five Thresholds are all about.

### ***The Five Thresholds of postmodern conversion***

So what are these similar landscapes along the path to faith, these so-called thresholds of postmodern conversion? Of course these look different in different people, they are paced differently, they are always experienced in the very real-life colours and contexts of each person. (Enough qualifiers yet?) But there are these five significant shifts that tend to go on in postmodern people as they come to faith.

#### *First, our friends moved from distrust to trust.*

Somewhere along the line, they learned to trust a Christian. Mark was guarded and aloof. He did not trust us Christians. This kept him far away from exploring Jesus with us. It was impossible for him to shed that distrust. But then something wonderful and mysterious happened and Mark crossed this threshold.

#### *Second, they moved from complacent to curious.*

The fact that our friends actually came to trust a Christian didn't necessarily mean that they were at all curious about Jesus. Matthew, for example, had started trusting a Christian but was pretty uninterested in Jesus. Matthew was successful and had everything going for him and had no reason at all to be curious about Jesus. But then something wonderful and mysterious happened, and Matthew crossed this threshold.

#### *Third, our friends moved from being closed to change in their life, to being open to change in their life.*

Interestingly, this always seemed to be the hardest threshold to cross - not for all of them, but for most of them. Adrian, for example, had started trusting some Christians and was even asking questions about Jesus. He was very curious. But he had no interest at all in examining his personal life. That was off limits. But then something wonderful and mysterious happened, and Adrian crossed this threshold.

#### *The fourth threshold is the move from meandering to seeking.*

Even when our friends became curious about Jesus and open to change in their life, it didn't necessarily follow that they began actively, purposefully seeking God. It was more natural for them to meander. Steve, for example, was very intrigued after some Christian students (whom he met sleeping in cardboard boxes at an event to raise awareness and money for the homeless) talked with him about Jesus. Steve accepted invitations to Bible studies, to worship, and even to a mission trip to another country. But he wasn't necessarily wanting to come to conclusions, to really seek answers. But then something wonderful and mysterious happened, and Steve crossed this threshold.

*Finally, each of our friends had one more threshold to cross. They needed to cross the threshold of the kingdom itself.*

They needed to repent and believe and give their life to Jesus. Many people who journey well along the path to faith, learning to trust a Christian, becoming curious about Jesus, becoming open to personal change, even seeking after answers, never become Christians. Sarah might have been one of those people. She was interested in Jesus, loved her new Christian friend and even went to conferences and Bible studies. But she was a scientist and couldn't imagine becoming a person of faith - not without physical proof. But then something wonderful and mysterious happened, and Sarah crossed the threshold into the kingdom itself.

## **Review by Edward Pilling**

February 2012 – Highfields Book of the Month

The past thirty years has seen countless books, seminars and conferences offered to the Christian public to help us contextualise the gospel to a post-modern culture. This is the first book that I have read where the introduction begins, "Meet the Authors (all 2000 of them)". That's the difference. Originally titled "I Once Was Lost", the re-branding of this book to a positive expression of a journey to faith cannot but add to the already outstanding content.

Everts and Schaupp interviewed and listened to the stories of post-moderns who have come to faith in Christ. They noticed common experiences, and certain themes were so prevalent that they became the core material of the book. The themes are called 'the five thresholds'

### ***The five thresholds are:***

1. from distrust to trust,
2. from complacent to curious,
3. from being closed to being open to change,
4. from meandering to seeking
5. and to crossing the threshold of the Kingdom itself.

### ***Individual stories***

However, but the authors are careful to caution against stereotyping and recognise individual pathways to Jesus are both mysterious and organic.

### ***Challenges***

The challenge is for us to be 'messengers' who develop

- a) relationship not teaching,
- b) friendship not evangelism,
- c) listening not preaching ...

The lesson from our post-modern brothers and sisters in Christ is clear, no trust – no listen.

### ***Distrust***

This is a societal norm for post-moderns. The challenge is for us to be 'messengers' who develop relationship not teaching, friendship not evangelism, listening not preaching and asking questions not giving answers can be difficult when our generational culture would take trust for granted. The lesson from our post-modern brothers and sisters in Christ is clear: no trust – no listen.

### ***Questions, answers, dialogue***

It was helpful to read that we do not have to have all the answers to all the questions of those who are curious.

The authors do suggest questions should be encouraged, but make the point that Jesus was asked 183 questions in the gospel accounts and answered only three, but asked 307 questions in reply (who researched that?).

The point being that dialogue and self-discovery are a means of accepting that there could be more than one worldview.

Commitment to the gospel was also clear. There is to be no distortion or compromise with the truth of the gospel. The 'seeker' of threshold four seeks Jesus, not some spiritual curiosity. They count the cost, and the personal implications of following Jesus should be unambiguous.

### ***Critical stage five, spiritual battle***

This book helps me to identify what stage a person has reached in their pathway to Jesus, in particular when someone moves from curiosity to seeking and the way to help them at each separate stage.

Threshold five also confirmed something I had observed that 'seeking' has a shelf life. There is an urgency the nearer someone is to the Kingdom of God, and the spiritual battle can become intense. At this time if a person hesitates to cross the threshold there can be a hardening of heart and attitude. We are encouraged to pray at each threshold, but especially at this point.

I have used this book as a set text for modules in evangelism. It always seems to capture the attention of the readers and stimulates healthy discussion. If you want to share the gospel, and are willing to share your life as well this is a great read.