

Mastering the Art of Discussion: Inside the STRIPPED Philosophy

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1. Beyond Labels: Why it's better to journey together.

Are you Democrat or Republican? Are you liberal or conservative? Are you an ally or homophobic? Are you Christian or non-Christian?

Are you on a spiritual journey?

The first set of questions force us into camps, by asking us: Are you one of us or one of them? The second includes us all. Everyone is on a spiritual journey. Sure people are moving in different directions and giving different expressions to that journey, but they are on the journey none-the-less. That's a starting point for discussion that pits us not against each other as adversaries but sets a place for each of us at the table-- a holiday meal where Aunt Marge complains about food, Uncle George blasts the ruling political party, Cousin Faith shows everyone her latest tattoo and piercing, little brother Alex talks about the movement to free Tibet, and you share how God is showing up in your life this year, helping you deal with your latest breakup. The common bond of family (and all the strange characters that includes) puts you at the same table, no matter what your views.

This is the idea behind STRIPPED. What if *everyone* came to a discussion with something to learn and experience? What if both those who follow Jesus and those who don't follow Jesus got together and talked about the eternal issues of humanity like isolation, love, and purpose? What if each person had the opportunity to freely share from her own experience and efforts to make sense of it all?

For those who aren't followers of Jesus, you can create a safe place where they can share their spiritual journey and be accepted no matter what they say or conclude at the end. It becomes a place where their voice matters, because all truth expressed is also used by God to shape and refine the faith of the believers in the group. The group becomes a space in which all co-journey for a time.

Consider the typical group option for those who aren't followers of Jesus:

A believer finds several people who are spiritually interested and suggests an evangelistic bible study. A believer leads the study, perhaps from the Gospel of John, helping others see the truths about Christ in the Bible and encouraging them to place their faith in Christ as Savior and Lord. Believers are there to instruct, guide, lead, but not usually to learn. They've already embraced the truths in the study for themselves and are simply eager for others to do the same.

Nothing is wrong with that approach where appropriate and relevant. But for some people an experience with a perceived agenda & focus (conversion) isn't a safe place to explore. Some people might feel like Christians come with all the answers and only have time for them if they're going to end up following Jesus. Again it puts people into two separate camps: seekers (those who are searching) or Christians (those who've already found what they were looking for.) And a person may not even be actively exploring Christianity at this point. Right now a direct discussion about the gospel may seem irrelevant to them but a group talking about life and spiritual journey, now that fits where they're at.

2. God in the Flesh: 21st Century Incarnation.

It's no secret that believers are meant to be the visible representation of what Jesus (what living in the Kingdom of God) looks like. In a STRIPPED discussion group followers of Jesus have an opportunity to exhibit that kind of incarnational witness. In such a group the orthodoxy of their stated belief will visibly connect with the "rubber-meets-the road" of their lives-- what Brian MacLaren calls orthopraxy or belief in practice. Or, where a disconnect is exposed, the group creates an opportunity for believers to explore what faith looks like on a spiritual journey sometimes filled with struggles, questions, and doubts. The group's insights and questions will shape and challenge followers of Jesus to live integrated lives.

For those who don't follow Jesus, rubbing shoulders with people who think and live differently, is to be influenced incarnationally. With such interaction, how genuine and alive this witness to the transforming power of the gospel of Christ would be!

Now you probably have all sorts of practical questions about how this is going to work. *If everyone just shares what they believe, isn't this just going to turn into another relativistic "that's what works for you and this is what works for me"?* There is always that possibility when you bring a mixed group of beliefs to the table in our sensitive culture. But an alternative that skirts such perceived danger robs the gospel of its power as the Truth. The discussion questions are designed not only to enable people to share their spiritual beliefs but also to evaluate them. The questions encourage them to take the time to really consider the implications of their beliefs. As the facilitator you have the privilege of helping people uncover not only what they believe but also why.

3. Don't Sabotage the Discussion: The art and science of listening.

It would sadden all of us to learn that someone didn't want to be part of a discussion group because his experience has taught him that Christians don't listen. People notice when others are quick to correct their theology and judge their thoughts and feelings as right or wrong. So, when they say, "I think there are many ways to God," and we respond immediately by explaining why there is only ONE way to God, we end up shutting down the conversation. Yes, theologically speaking, Jesus is the only way to God. But that's not what new people are wondering about when they first come to something sponsored by Christians. What they want to know is, "Is this a safe place for me, where I can ask my questions and share my thoughts and feelings without being condemned, shamed, or exposed?"

Creating a Safe Environment

Since STRIPPED is intended to create a safe place for both those who follow and don't follow Jesus to journey spiritually together, a few basic ground rules will make for more enjoyable and helpful traveling companions.

First, communicate two simple ground rules at the beginning of each session.

- **Any question is a good question.** No one is allowed to critique or judge what another person has asked. (The discussion will definitely end if you respond with: *“You can’t think that - that’s stupid.”* Avoid communicating this or anything like this.)
- **Focus on self-application.** Talk about how the ideas being discussed apply to yourself, not how they apply to others.

Second, become a listener. I’m always amazed at the number of times someone asks me *“How are you?”* and then responds *“fine, thank you”* before I ever even asked them the question in return. They weren’t really listening to what I said, they simply assumed what I was going to say. How much more costly are the consequences when we fail to listen well in a spiritual conversation. In our fast-paced and impersonal world (*“Listen carefully as our menu options have changed. Press 1 if you want to ... Press 2 for ... Press 9 to hear the menu again.”*), people are starved for real attention. If you listen well, you will feed their soul.

As the facilitator you set the tone. When you model and encourage others to imitate listening well, your discussion can move to a whole new level of honesty and safety in exploration. When people respond to the STRIPPED discussion questions, here are some suggestions:

- **Affirm the person for what she has shared.** *“Thanks, I really appreciate you sharing that with us.”*
- **See if they want to talk more.** *“That’s interesting. Would you like to tell us more about that?”*
- **Give opportunity for others to share their thoughts.** *“Thanks for sharing that. What thoughts do the rest of you have about this question?”* Perhaps you could ask: *“Has anyone else ever felt the same way?”*
- **Don’t correct or judge.** Even when people share things that are obviously incorrect or off-the-wall, don’t jump in to correct them. Instead first explore how they came to that conclusion and what that looks like in their life. Seek to understand why they think that. Affirm the person, see if they have more to say, and open the discussion up for others.

Here are some other things that will help you listen well:

- **Put yourself in their shoes.** Think about their background and personal experiences. If you try to understand where they’re coming from, you’ll find yourself caring more and judging less. Their thoughts may not be “right” but they may be understandable.
- **Be “Open” in your posture.** Eyes down, arms folded, and chair turned away says, *“I’m closed off to what you’re saying.”* Some natural eye contact, arms relaxed, and chair angled more toward a person says, *“I’m interested.”*
- **Reflect questions back to the group.** If someone asks for information, say, *“What do the rest of you think?”* Let the group wrestle with it. If the discussion gets crazy, you can always reel them back in by saying, *“That’s really great discussion. Let’s talk about that some more later. If anyone wants to discuss that further, let me know after our session.”*

4. Locating the Gospel: When does incarnation take voice?

But isn’t there a time to explain the gospel? Yes there is and the time is always. If the Christians in your group live “integrated faith lives”, the gospel is going to be continually part of the conversation. Even if they don’t, that will be exposed, and in the process the fully fleshed out gospel will become part of the dialogue. The topics lend themselves to the deep answers the gospel gives because they are questions related to life.

There's also something to be said for allowing a soul awakening moment speak for itself. You've seen the kind of movie where a deeply moving event has just taken place and then the cheesy narrator proceeds to explain the obvious, as if you were too stupid to figure out what you'd just experienced. The explanation destroys the magic of the moment and robs it of its emotional impact. Allow such moments when they occur to speak for themselves and gently tread when explaining to someone what has just been revealed.

As the facilitator, be mindful of where the Spirit is at work in someone and watch for those natural opportunities to highlight the gospel in the group discussion. You may want to pull someone aside after the group to chat more. There are STRIPPED questions which lead more directly into a discussion of the gospel. But, don't rush the timeline just for the sake of making sure you get it in.

5. Unpacking Explore: How do I know what to recommend?

There are basically three kinds of resources you'll find in EXPLORE: literature, films, and paintings.

Not all of these resources paint from a Christian worldview, in fact some paint from quite the opposite. But these are the ways real people have chosen to answer these common life questions. Sometimes when we see an alternate worldview played out to its full implications in a work of fiction, we realize how much we don't want to embrace that belief.

To find out which resource to recommend you need to know what idea or belief you're trying to encourage or even challenge in someone's thinking.

To learn more about each resource:

Start with www.wikipedia.org

For films check out <http://www.damaris.org/cw/> (The toolbar has options for films and books.) Damaris is a UK-based Christian group that analyzes current culture and provides discussion questions and overviews of recent movies and books. You can read their review of Nick Hornby's *How to Be Good* here.

Sometimes for older books, such as Mary Shelley's *The Last Man*, a great overview of the point of the story can be found in the introduction.

Not all of these resources are appropriate for everyone. Nick Hornby's *How to be Good* has a fair bit of f-word usage. It's probably not anything your students haven't already heard of course, but perhaps something some may be more sensitive to than others. The movies are the same. They were chosen not because they perfectly represent Christianity or for upstanding moral examples, but because powerful illustrations of the truth (or by counter example, false and empty solutions) are contained within. Sometimes they are worth wading through the muck and the mire for.

6. Not Just For Boy Scouts: How to Avoid Facilitator Failure.

Even though I'm not a Boy Scout I know their motto: Be Prepared.

If you've got a good mix of people in your group (the Christian who plays church on Sundays and sleeps with his girlfriend the same night, the artist who's been heavily influenced by Zen Buddhism, a Wiccan who shares about Druid rituals, and a jaded "done-the-Christian-thing

already” individual who’s now exploring other religions) winging it isn’t going to cut it. Any shallow preparation will soon become apparent and you’ll quickly lose the ability to bring clarity and focus to the group’s time together.

To avoid facilitator failure:

1. **Be on the journey yourself.** By that I mean, you personally need to engage with the same questions you’re asking of everyone else. As you engage with the questions honestly, you’ll want to go deeper because your stake in the “answers” will be as great as anyone else’s. The group will appreciate your authenticity and honesty because you’ll be exploring and journeying with them, reinforcing a “we” and not a “me versus them” mentality.

2. **Do your homework.** Decide in advance (not 5 minutes before) which questions you’re going to ask. Think through the people in your group and where they’re at on their spiritual journey. Which are going to be the best questions for them? Which options in the EXPLORE section would you recommend to them as follow up on what you’ve been discussing? You’re going to have to read up on the authors, filmmakers, and painters you don’t know. (There are easy ways to do this, which you can find in the STRIPPED Appendix Q and in Section 5 here.)

3. **Invite the Holy Spirit into the group.** I bet you really want to see spiritual transformation. Are you willing to spend time praying for God’s Spirit to work in each individual, enacting the kind of powerful change that mere words cannot accomplish?

In talking about dialogue where people of differing beliefs are involved, Melinda Carter illuminates this process:

“Through prayer and our personal relationships with Christ, we also invite the Holy Spirit into the Dialogue. Not only do we invite Him to speak to us, and through us, but we also invite Him to speak to the hearts of those involved. This becomes a collective experience with God that all are involved in. Of course, we must be aware that the enemy, Satan, will plant his own sources of deception within these collaborative conversations, as well...and thus must emphasize a sobriety and vigilance.”¹

Recognize God’s active presence and take the opportunities he gives to speak a word of guidance, or recommend a resource that causes someone to take the next step toward following Jesus with all of their being.

7. **Sharing Secrets: How STRIPPED 1.0 becomes 2.0 when you talk.**

This facilitator’s guide is a work in progress. We want to hear your insights and ideas so we can share them with other facilitators.

This is the 21st Century, so robbing ideas from the “rich” and giving them to the idea “poor” will be done via www.INSIDEARTANDSOUL.COM. It’s not yet up and running for such feedback but we hope it will be soon and don’t want you to miss out. Register yourself as a STRIPPED facilitator by sending me an email at Tanya.Walker@uscm.org with your name and ministry location. I’ll let you know when the message boards are up and running and keep you posted on any STRIPPED updates. Eventually we’ll post any STRIPPED facilitator guide updates on that site, as well as the secrets people discover to mastering the art of a STRIPPED discussion.

8. The beginning of it all.

In a nutshell the STRIPPED philosophy of inclusion and incarnation is summed up in this poem by Edwin Markham:

Outwitted

He drew a circle that shut me out –
Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.
But Love and I had the wit to win:
We drew a circle that took him in!²

¹ <http://fireseedanthology.blogspot.com/> June 27, 2006 Spiritual Dialogue accessed 9-12-06

² http://www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/poets/m_r/markham/poems.htm accessed 9-6-06

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