

THE TRUTH IS...

SHARING THE TRUTH OF JESUS WITH
CONFIDENCE, CONVICTION,
AND COMPASSION

STEVEN KOZAK

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To my amazing family.
Countless night at the kitchen counter writing in between dinners,
parenting, and pauses in conversation. Thank you for your support,
love, and most of all, patience.

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PREFACE

I grew up in a Christian home. But I didn't stay there. By the time I entered high school, I began to walk away from the church. Simultaneously, as doubts began to enter my mind, as negative influences from friends and culture made a significant imprint, church became less of a priority and discipleship left by the wayside.

It wasn't until much later in life did I decide to investigate what the church claimed was true and where I found a true sense of belonging and community. My endless searching led me to seminary, apologetics, and eventually in ministry. It didn't take long for me to see the same doubts, questions, and search for truth in my students. Spending the last fifteen years in youth ministry, I can tell you from first-hand experience in nearly every arena of youth culture, there is a great need for worldview and apologetics training. Today's Christian students are faced with more significant challenges, higher amounts of stress, and even greater threats to their faith than ever before. Not only do students continue to ask profound and insightful questions, but they are also asking at an increasingly younger age. Questions once asked in college, or high school are now the questions of middle school students and sometimes younger.

However the challenge is not only convincing our students they need the skills and confidence to engage their culture with the gospel but our youth leaders as well. Parents, pastors, and teachers have to be prepared to answer and equip our young people. As leaders, we need to not be afraid to ask the hard questions and be prepared with a strong biblical worldview to address the significant issues

of our time and our culture. Truth—which seems like it ought to be a clear black and white issue, is vastly grayer for our students. There is tremendous confusion surrounding identity, morality, and even the role of religion.

This is the whole reason I decided to write this book: prepare leaders to help students answer questions and further their walk with Christ. I don't want students to go through what I did. I came back to Christ, but most don't.

Over and over, I am asked for useful resources from parents and pastors who have tremendous desire but very little time. My hope is that this book provides you the necessary tools and knowledge without overwhelming you and consuming precious time. My goal was to combine content and method in an approachable format that can be talked about at the dinner table, small group, or classroom. There is a lifetime of resources available to anyone willing to take the time and energy to study. But there just isn't enough time to tackle it all. This will provide you with an excellent starting point.

More than ever we need youth who are well trained in what they believe and why and prepared to give an answer in their fast-paced, highly digitized culture. But equally, we need leaders who are prepared to train those students.

I provided you with conversation starters and ways to discuss and ideas to integrate apologetics into your ministry or family. Use them. Have your leaders read this. Give it to parents and teachers. The future may belong to the students, but it is our job to hand it off well.

INTRODUCTION

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Her name was Jennifer. She was the star of the youth group. She was the leader, the role model; the one that both parents and pastor were convinced would be a much-needed light into the dark corners of university life. Naturally, Jennifer was commissioned and sent to the local public university. Everyone was confident that she would no doubt make a difference.

A semester later, the phone call came. "Dad, I am not sure I believe in Jesus anymore." Without panicking, Jennifer's dad questioned and probed—searching for the right thing to say to set his perfect daughter back on track. Her biggest reason for turning away from the church and the faith she had known her entire life was courtesy of one professor. She told her dad, "I had a smart professor that said we shouldn't believe in fairy tales if we are going to make it in the world of academia." That was all it took—one professor and one semester to erase eighteen years of Sunday school, youth group, and prayer.

What was missing? Neither Jennifer, her parents, or pastor saw what was coming. While so many of us wait for a problem to occur, then search for the antibiotic, the solution is in the inoculation—a proactive solution before there ever is a problem. The entire Christian community must work together to prepare our students for what they

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are guaranteed to experience after high school (or even in high school).

THIS ISN'T YOUR MOMMA'S YOUTH GROUP

This story and many others like have far too often come tragically true. For nearly a decade I had the privilege of shaking hands and giving hugs to every senior as they received their diploma and made their way across the graduation stage. Part of my job was to read a selected verse or passage the student chose after their name was read. I considered it an honor and privilege, but also a burden. I wondered how many of these students that I had to come to know so well and care about so much would turn out like Jennifer.

But why so much angst? After all, you and I can only have so much control and influence. These students have to make the Christian faith their faith, and that is not always a smooth ride into the sunset of eternal bliss. The path is narrow and the ride often bumpy. We worry because we believe that as teachers, pastors, parents, and mentors of students we are increasingly ill-equipped to successfully navigate our rapidly changing culture. In other words, this isn't your momma's youth group anymore. This isn't the youth group of the seventies, or the nineties, or even the youth group of the millennials.

The youth group that successfully attracted students through unique messaging, entertainment, games, super trendy and inviting spaces and relevant motivational talks by hipster youth pastors no longer have the same lasting impact. The worry that students are leaving the church in droves is no longer true—because they already left. The days of evangelical Christianity as the predominant religious affil-

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iation are long over. That crown now belongs to those who wish to remove all identification—the *nones*. Millennials became famous by seeking a more authentic experience in church, community, justice, and a place of social equality. So we modeled youth group to fit those needs. Today, Generation Z, although they maintain some similarities to that of their elder generations are searching for identity and belonging. They are unsure of what truth is or where to find it and have been convinced that acceptance means affirmation—even if affirmation means immorality.

AS SIMPLE AS MAKING DISCIPLES

The job description of anyone who leads or mentors youth is simple. Make disciples—disciples who go and make disciples. I think that when you boil it down, we are not in the business of running great programs, writing books, crafting the most impactful retreats, or even publishing the most comprehensive curriculum. These are all just tools to help us in our mission to make disciples. However, these tools are only a part of what is needed.

Another critical element of that disciple-making process is preparing students to engage their world with the gospel, rather than conform to it, hide from it or run from it, by helping students look out into the world and see it through the eyes of Jesus. Disciple-making is about teaching students to understand what a Christian worldview looks like. When confronted with things like trust, truth, social issues, history, politics, family life, media, and morality; how can we walk with students so that they are being guided through life grounded in the reality of biblical truth?

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Whether we choose to accept it or not, the world we knew as students is far different than the world our students are faced with today—with an entirely different set of presuppositions, a different set of moral standards, different ideas of truth, a different view of authority, and a different idea of the role the Bible plays in life. The list goes on. As a result, many of us have found ourselves staring at a generation we don't understand with challenges we have never faced or anticipated. We stand paralyzed in fear of the terrain before us. Maybe it wasn't what we expected. Maybe the theories taught in seminary are no longer relevant. Rest assured, regardless of the reason, you find yourself in good company. You are not alone.

Remember what the disciples were doing after Jesus had resurrected? John's gospel describes the disciples meeting in an upper room with the doors locked because they were afraid of the Jewish religious leadership— for a good reason. What would happen next? People recognized Peter. Maybe their crucifixion was next. The disciples were facing at uncharted terrain. Paralyzed in fear, they just waited. But then Jesus shows up and lays on them the missional responsibility to carry the work he started to the rest of the world (John 20:19). They had to change their entire ministry model. Everything they had learned to do with Jesus, they now had to do without him. The model may have changed, but the mission had not. It was still about going into the world and proclaiming the gospel. Jesus made disciples. It was now their turn to go and make disciples. We bear that same responsibility as we make disciples of our students. We are sent so that our students might be sent. But that sending requires not only a keen and thorough understanding of the Bible and what it means to live a morally upright life. It also means having the ability to under-

stand and engage the world they live in every day without falling victim to it.

WHAT ARE WE UP AGAINST?

The disciples were up against the Jewish elite, the pagan religious practices of the Gentile world, and the Roman Empire. They had to figure out how a Jesus view of the world could infiltrate and transform that world. Our students' task is quite similar. They are up against secularism, skepticism, and alternative forms of spirituality. If my time spent with students over the years has taught me anything, it's that, despite how much students talk of their love for Jesus, a biblical worldview in areas like social sciences, psychology, politics, or history is highly questionable if not absent entirely.

Instead of a biblical worldview, students have been taught to create two spheres or compartments of life. One compartment is designed for our religious life. In it, we keep things like church, retreats, devotional time, prayer, and even those designated as church friends. This is our private life. It's the space we reserve for Jesus. The other compartment is where we keep the rest of our life. The public side of life—the life we share with the rest of the world.

Whether we have realized it or not, we have drawn a clear line in the sand between the secular and the sacred—and we have taught our students the same practice. Students, therefore, have no context for how to infiltrate and transform their world with the gospel. Houston Baptist professor and author, Nancy Pearcey describes students' weakness this way,

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“The reality is that most students lack the sense of how Christianity functions as a unified, overarching system of truth that applies to every area of life. Instead, they hold to Christianity as a collection of truths, but not as Truth.”¹

But wait a minute. We have a youth group, Bible memory, retreats, games, cool youth spaces, small groups, and conferences. Isn't that enough? What about all the effort and investment churches are making into youth? Track with me for a moment and let's get further beyond the great programs and millions of dollars invested. Clearly, participation in church and technical proficiency of the Bible is a huge piece. But it is a piece. Imagine a beautiful classic Corvette or Mustang, without an engine. It is great to look at, has a ton of potential, but it still needs an engine. Some people may never even notice and only admire the exterior, but that doesn't change the fact the car needs an engine. Teaching your students how to live and breathe a biblical worldview is the engine. It is the stuff under the hood, the stuff that most don't see or ever admire, yet is essential to go anywhere. In short, our students need to be taught to think like a follower of Jesus. They are wonderful worshippers, great prayers, selfless servants, but far too often give way to secularism when it comes to matters outside of the church building.

So what can we do? What can be done as pastors, youth leaders, and parents to be certain that when our students hit the pavement of the college campus, the corporate office or even the family gathering; they have the tools necessary to treat their everyday lives as a mission, and as a means to take the name of Jesus to the nations? How do you build an engine?

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Through various books, my experience of trial and error and even suggestions from students themselves, I have tried at least a dozen different strategies and programs. All of which I had hoped would launch my ministry into an entirely new dimension of effectiveness. But of all of those ways—some worked, most failed—I have found two simple, yet very intentional pieces that year after year made the greatest, lasting impact. In other words, although some engines are bigger and more powerful than others, these key parts are essential for all of them.

First key. As leaders, we must explore with our students what a sanctified life means in their context. Not just in preparation for the life to come, but holiness for this life now. Following Jesus is not about tapping into a magic formula to catch your reserved flight to heaven. It is about a missional lifestyle that captures every part of life—every thought and action—and makes it obedient to Christ. Every step, in every sphere, walking as Jesus did. But a missional life cannot be taught; it must be caught. Students need to see you setting the example. They need to see you get it right. They even need to see you get it wrong from time to time. Remember what Paul said. “Follow my example, as I follow Christ’s example” (1 Corinthians 11:1).

When I first started teaching, I was told that students don't care how much you know until they know how much you care. Today, I think that is only partially true. The millennial and digital generations are less impressed with the know-it-all on stage telling them how they should live and much less likely to seek out wisdom from on high. Instead, they want to see us humbly walk with them and participate. They are looking to be shown rather than told. They care about well we walk with them.

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Second key. What if youth group was more of a training ground, or like an inoculation? Think about what your ministry could look like if you intentionally created “battle like” conditions in a controlled environment allowing students to wrestle with ideas, issues at school or home, even politics? Creating a training ground means helping students properly filter these things through a biblical worldview. Correct, rebuke, and train. Their missional success in this world begins with their preparedness now. Believe me. Students are eager to learn. In fact, their brains are hardwired for learning at a greater capacity now than at any point in their lives. They have questions and want answers. Challenge them. They will rise to it.

This is more than just a shift in thinking. It is a shift in lifestyle. We, as youth leaders, need to live missional and invite students into that space. Invite them into the challenges, the successes, and the failures. Invite them to follow your example as you seek to follow Christ. And then provide them opportunities to lead others. Show them what it means to see the world as Jesus does so they don't merely strive to just successfully survive the world, but transform it and redeem it for the kingdom of God.

There is no overnight solution, quick fix, or the new program to run that will fix everything and have students lined up as if the latest pop star was in town. Discipleship is a process. It is a process requiring relationships and a process that requires patience and careful planning. Confidence in your students venturing off to college and beyond takes rigorous and intentional training. That training starts here, and it starts now.

This book is designed as your starting point.

GETTING STARTED

First, let's be clear about what this book is not. I never intended this book to cover every square inch of material when it comes to training students to understand what they believe and why. Nor does this book answer every possible question. Instead, my desire in this book is to get the ball rolling. It is a starting point. Training our students in the world of apologetics and the art of sharing one's faith is neither a sprint nor a marathon. It is like 400-meter hurdle—how you start is vital to finishing well. Too slow, you'll never catch up, too fast and you'll run out of gas.

Assume for a minute that God does not exist, and Jesus was not real. Imagine that the world you occupy and enjoy was nothing more than a happy accident and religion nothing more than blind comfort for the weak minded. Salvation in Jesus aides in that crutch by deifying a mythological story of a man who may have claimed to be divine and whose followers devised a plan to falsely claim he came back from the dead. Maybe even go so far as to imagine that any definitive truth cannot exist, morals are a human construct, and the solution of evil rests in the evolution of the human brain to a higher state of existence and understanding. This is where I want to begin our journey together. Now I, of course, understand that if you have been a follower of Christ for any length of time, it is impossible to set aside your foundational principles by which you live and pretend they no longer exist. But I want you to at least get a glimpse of where I began this journey—from the beginning.

Together we are going to make the case that Christianity as a worldview provides the best possible answers to life's greatest questions. We will walk together exploring truth, doubt, the existence of

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God, the nature of and reliability for the Bible, the problem of evil and suffering in the world, and the resurrection. Each chapter offers a comprehensive yet concise and easy to grasp treatment of the nature of the Christian worldview. However, we cannot limit learning to theory and general principles. My goal for this book is that you would use it, write in it, refer back to it, and as a result, grow in knowledge and practice.

To aid in this process, I have added a section at the end of each chapter designed to help guide conversations with your students. Whether you are a pastor, parent, small group leader, or teacher, the conversation starters are intentionally crafted to create dialogue. Additionally—and admittedly unorthodox—I provided you with some white space for notes, ideas, questions, objections, and reminders for further exploration. The best learning happens when we engage the material on several different levels. Reading this book will not be enough. Use it.

We all wonder if our students will graduate and turn out like Jennifer. My hope and prayer for this book is that you will no longer need to wonder. My prayer is that your students would strut across that stage not only confident to take on the world for the kingdom but eager.