

God's Word Influences Unbelievers

BY TREVOR LARSEN

Trevor Larsen is a seminary teacher and a “come-alongside coach” who is convinced of God’s desire for all peoples. He and his wife live alongside 16 Asian movement catalysts in a “fruitful Band of Brothers.” Trevor’s goal is to help these brothers maximize their fruit as multiplying movements, and through them help other movement catalysts. He tells stories of these movement catalysts and offers biblical materials that support movements in three digital books completed so far at www.FocusOnFruit.org. Trevor started the first team in 1998, which birthed the first believer group in a UPG in 2000. Together they have been learning “fruitful practices” through field experimentation and biblical reflection. They combine community development, inner healing, and multiplication of believer groups while empowering leaders’ groups. Their fruit has multiplied into a family of linked movements in UPGs. They continue to be surprised by God’s grace.



Is it biblical to ask a non-believer, without the Holy Spirit, to obey in response to God’s word?

One role of the Holy Spirit is to convict unbelievers concerning sin and righteousness and judgment (John 16:8). We should not doubt that the Spirit uses the word of God to do his work in unbelievers. Romans 10:17 tells us that faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.

If we examine the word messages in Acts and the gospels, only two are delivered just to disciples. Most of the word messages are delivered to mixed audiences having a higher proportion of unbelievers than believers. The two exceptions are Acts 20, delivered to a group of elders, and the Upper Room Discourse, delivered to the disciples.

Jesus told the parable of the four kinds of soil (illustrating four types of responses to the word) to a mixed audience: mostly unbelievers and some believers. In doing so, he implicitly challenged *all* his listeners to become like the fourth kind of soil: having hearts which receive the word of God,

He did not differentiate believers and unbelievers when he spoke that word; they all received the same message. The word was delivered with an invitation for everyone to respond.



Photo by IMB

committing deeply to embracing God’s word, and becoming transformed by it. The purpose of this teaching was not to convey the gospel. Even though most of his audience consisted of unbelievers, Jesus wanted his listeners to increase their responsiveness to the word of God.

When you read the parable of the four kinds of soil, did you ever stop and say, “Jesus didn't really expect any of the unbelievers to respond”? That was not the nature of Jesus' delivery of the word. He was challenging all his listeners to respond, to embrace the word of God and align their lives with it, lest their lives be unfruitful. He did not differentiate believers and unbelievers when he spoke that word; they all received the same message. The word was delivered with an invitation for everyone to respond. But their responses to the word would differentiate those ready to respond to God's word. The response to which Jesus called his mixed audience was the fourth kind of response: very distinct from the first three kinds of responses.

Jesus said some people would not embrace his word, so we do not expect everyone to respond positively to the word. This is true whether the word is delivered in a one-way preaching format to a large mixed audience or discussed in small groups consisting of a mix of believers and unbelievers. Most churches nowadays do not contain such a mixed audience; participants are all believers (unlike Acts and the gospels where mixed audiences predominate).

What happens in our Discovery Bible Groups? A rejecting person (the first kind of soil, the hard soil) would rarely participate in our Bible studies, because Muslims in unreached people groups reject the invitation to come to a Bible discussion (or are not invited – to reduce the risk to those open to discussing the Bible). Group participants have demonstrated enough responsiveness of heart to dare to enter a Bible discussion.

Our group discussions include representatives of the other three types of soil. The words of Christ that they read and discuss challenge them all to respond to His word but they respond differently. Most Muslims in a UPG who do not respond well to the word (do not start to align their lives with what they hear) stop coming to the group discussion or may threaten the others.

Islamic people groups manifest far more social preselection and self-selection than commonly seen in Canadian and American churches, because of the high risk. What advantage would they gain

by starting to follow Jesus, if they didn't really want to face the cost? They might lose their job, they might be kicked out of their house, or they might be beaten. In some ways it is surprising how many Muslims do join Bible discussion groups, yet this is a much safer environment for them than to hear the word one-on-one or to enter a church building. Each quarter, many of the Muslims who have emboldened themselves to join a group Bible discussion, put their faith in Christ. Others in their same group may need another quarter before coming to faith.

The Spirit of God does not indwell an unbeliever. But they have access to God's Spirit working *externally* to bring them toward faith. Jesus explains this in John 16:8. The Spirit convicts the world of sin, righteousness and judgment. This differs from the Spirit's role in believers, and He often uses believers discussing God's word with unbelievers to bring them to faith. So, believers should help unbelievers by discussing the word with them. That's the *replicating pattern* in the Gospels and Acts. In this way, God's Spirit awakens the hearts of some unbelievers to respond to God. So, we should expose unbelievers to the word of God. If they get into the habit of reading and discussing God's word in a group of people they know (even joining the group before they believe), we often find that over time these people come to faith.

You might reflect on your own experience, especially if you came to faith at an older age. I grew up in a



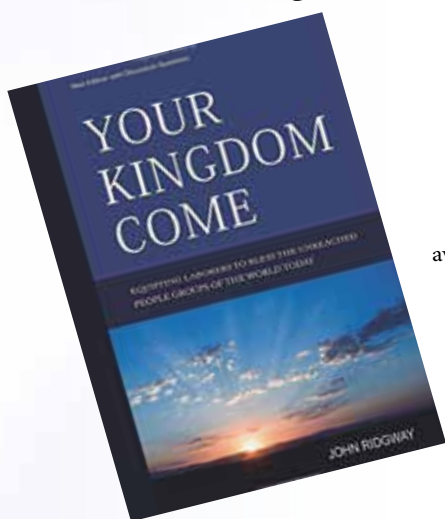
liberal denominational church and when I was in high school, they chose me as the youth leader. I wasn't a believer yet, and when they made me the youth leader, it made me feel very uncomfortable about my own spiritual condition. I couldn't grasp what I was missing, or how I could become a believer. I didn't really know that I *wasn't* a believer, because I had been going to church. All I knew was: "If I'm going to lead this group, I need to have a deeper experience with God" (or something like that). I went out in the woods and sat there a long time. I tried to pray and ask God: "How am I going to find you? How am I going to get to faith?" I just sat there and talked to God the best way I knew how. I didn't know what I was doing. I was just trying to find God: how could I go forward? Then God spoke to an unbeliever. I had heard parts of the Bible in church, and I started reading the Bible, and it started to penetrate my heart. The Scriptures started to help me, even before I was a believer, while I was still blind to some of what I was reading. Yet there

was a point where God came to me and took off my blinders. This happened during the first Bible discussion group I attended, which had a mixture of believers and unbelievers. I became convinced that God was personal, that He saw my sin and forgave me, and gave me faith in Him.

We shouldn't doubt that God will speak to unbelievers when they interact with His word. Most unbelievers who begin responding to God's word try to do what they think will please him, but then God breaks through and shows them the real issue is their sin, and their faith in grace that comes through Christ, not in what they do.

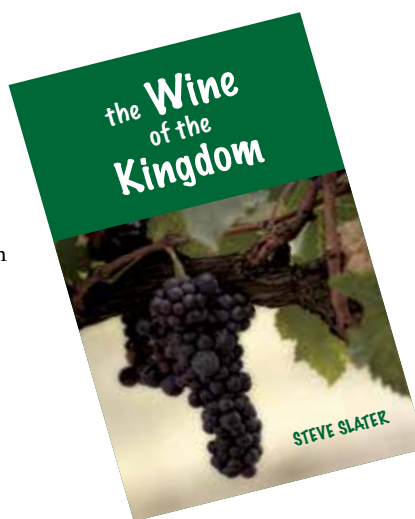
If you reread the Book of Acts, how many times did God surprise people in the book of Acts? God did many things that surprised believers. We must be open to what God's Spirit may do in our day, to bring salvation through His word to those who have never-before heard the good news. Very often God's Spirit uses His word in the process of drawing unbelievers toward saving faith. 📖

Take the message of Jesus outside the Christian bubble.



Strategic keys to help you become a blessing to unreached people groups and their families right where they live

available at [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com)



A quick read to introduce Jesus' message of the kingdom to those hindered by the baggage of "cultural Christianity"