

TALKING JESUS

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Somewhat belatedly I came across the 2015 report *Talking Jesus: Perceptions of Jesus, Christians and evangelism in England* (www.talkingjesus.org), which contains the results of research carried out among 1000 people by the Barna Group on behalf of the Church of England, the Evangelical Alliance and HOPE. It contains some fascinating statistics. For instance:

57% of people in England identify as Christians (9% are practising: i.e. they pray, read the Bible, and attend a church service at least once a month)

40% of people do not realise Jesus was a real person who actually lived

43% of people believe in the resurrection of Jesus

To my delight, I discovered that the majority of Christians are open about their faith

66% of practising Christians have talked about Jesus to a non-Christian in the past month

72% of practising Christians feel comfortable talking to non-Christians about Jesus.

On the other hand 54% of non-Christians who know a Christian, have not had a conversation with this person about faith in Jesus! Significantly, of those who say they are a non-Christian but have had a conversation with a Christian about Jesus, 1 in 5 of them remains open to find out more or to have an experience of Jesus.

The importance of talking about Jesus is indicated by the fact that 36% of practising Christians say talking to a Christian about Jesus was important in their coming to faith. Not surprisingly, conversations with practising Christians who they knew well were three times as effective as conversations with practising Christians who were not known well! Other significant factors in non-Christians' journey to faith were attending a church service(s) other than a wedding or funeral (28%); and reading the Bible (27%). By contrast only 5% of non-Christian respondents said that an individual church's outreach programme (e.g. parent and toddler group, food bank) or going to an introduction to Christianity course like Alpha or Christianity explored was positively influenced them to become a Christian.

How do we encourage more people to talk to their friends about Jesus? Like many ministers, I have put on training courses on faith-sharing. But that is a sign of desperation! As has often been pointed out, in the New Testament telling people about Jesus is not regarded as something Christians 'ought' to do, but rather is seen as the natural overflow of people's experience of God. In this respect the Apostle Paul's description of the coming of the Gospel to Thessalonica could be significant: "Our message of the gospel came to you not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction" (1 Thess 1.5 NRSV) – literally 'with super-abundance' (*pleriphoria*) – there was an 'over-flow' of confidence and, I would maintain, of excitement in what God had done in Christ! If people are to tell others of their faith, then they need to be allowed to get excited about their faith; once people are excited then they cannot but share with others the difference that Jesus has made to them. I used to say to my ministerial team members that their first task was "to excite fresh hope and faith in God". In our services we used to have regular "I am excited" slots, as individuals spoke for two or three minutes as to how they had seen God at work in the past week.

But, of course, it is not just telling others about Jesus – it is answering others about Jesus. Mahatma Gandhi once said to some missionaries in India: "You work so hard at it. Just remember that the rose never invites anyone to smell it. If it is fragrant, people will walk across the garden and endure the thorns to smell it." I find it instructive that the Apostle Peter did not write, 'Be ready at all times to take the initiative and share your faith', but rather 'Be ready at all times to answer... to explain'

Peter assumes that if we are living truly Christian lives, then people will automatically want to ask why - what makes us different? In other words, we need to be provocatively attractive for God!