

The Quiet Revival & The Bible

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Andrew Ollerton asks, How
should we respond to the
changing landscape?*



I used to worry that the Bible might be a potential risk to mission – too complicated, too controversial – but recent findings suggest otherwise. The Quiet Revival research by Bible Society (2025) has captured a major shift in the spiritual landscape in the UK. It reveals that young people, or Gen Z, are surprisingly open to going to church and engaging with the Bible.

In 2018 when Bible Society commissioned the reputable agency YouGov to measure public perceptions of faith, it polled 19,000 people in England and Wales and found that only 4% of young people said they went to church. That's as we would expect. The church is getting progressively older. However, in 2024, when YouGov redid the same research, the number of young people going to church had quadrupled to 16%. What's more, the percentage of young men was even higher at 21%! That's a significant increase in a short space of time, but is it really a 'Revival', even a quiet one?

When it comes to the Bible, young people have almost no knowledge of the Bible and yet they are often curious and intrigued by what it might have to offer amidst the geopolitical instability, culture wars and mental health crisis that marks our moment. According to The Quiet Revival research, 35 % of young men outside the church say they would like to understand the Bible for themselves. In recent months, I have spoken with dozens of young people who have turned to the Bible. Their reasons may vary but their desire to go deeper and know more is often surprisingly intense:

- One 16-year old turned up at a church in Bath saying he felt deceived by modern education and the media, so he'd been reading the Bible instead.
- A 21-year old from Wales told me he nearly committed suicide because life felt so lonely and hopeless. Instead, he bought a Bible and started reading it.
- A 19-year old student told me she saw videos on TikTok about the reliability of the Bible and its impact on Western culture and wanted to find out more.

The Bible has been the world's bestselling book, year after year, but in the recent past, it was often an object of derision, especially among New Atheists like Richard Dawkins. However, a major vibe shift is now occurring. Many celebrities and public intellectuals outside the church seem drawn to the Bible. Thinkers like Jordan Peterson or Tom Holland, celebrities like Russell Brand and Bear Grylls or sports stars like Bukayo Saka or Maro Itoje. Like me, you may not agree with everything they stand for, but isn't it interesting that they are unashamedly looking to the Bible for meaning and truth?



With this in mind, I believe the story of Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch in Acts 8 has much to teach us as we reflect on the shifting spiritual landscape in the UK and how we respond. In Acts 8:26-40, a wealthy African dignitary is riding home after visiting Jerusalem. Despite overseeing the treasures of the Queen of Ethiopia, he is searching for something deeper. We know this because he had travelled hundreds of miles on a spiritual pilgrimage to Israel's Temple. He'd also acquired a copy of the scroll of Isaiah, which he was reading on the journey home. That's when the Holy Spirit prompts Philip to run alongside his chariot and engage him in conversation. Philip must have had the shock of his life when he realised this wealthy African was reading the Prophet Isaiah from Israel's Scriptures!

I think we may be surprised by who is turning to the Bible today. People have not found what they're looking for in secular materialism or through institutional religion, but they are still searching for meaning and truth. So how can we be ready to share Jesus through the Scriptures? I think Philip offers us three vital lessons:

1. BE OPEN TO THE SPIRIT

Philip was leading a successful ministry in Samaria when God called him out of his comfort zone. God's call won't always make sense initially. He rarely reveals what will happen before we step out in faith, but if we stay where we are and keep doing what we've always done, we may miss out on what's coming down the road. Philip was brave enough to go to an unfamiliar place and engage one individual travelling home. The Holy Spirit sees what's going on outside the four walls of the church and wants to steer his people towards the spiritually open, but we must be open to the Spirit.

I'm not very good at this. I tend to be too engrossed in my own plans to notice. So, my wife and I pray a simple prayer each morning: 'Lord, please show us who we can bless today and lead us to the curious seekers.' Sometimes, this prayer gets answered in surprising ways. Recently, while watching my son play football, I got chatting to someone and felt the Holy Spirit nudge me to ask him, 'Have you had your heart broken recently?' I resisted for a while. He didn't look the sort, but I eventually gave in. As it turned out, he had recently faced heartbreak and needed hope. We've connected since, and he's now reading a book I wrote on the Bible.

2. BE OPEN TO THE SCRIPTURES

When Philip approached the Eunuch, he was prepared. He began with the very passage that was troubling the man and shared the good news about Jesus. 'Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus' (Acts 8:35). What if Philip hadn't engaged with those Scriptures? Of course, we don't have all the answers, and sometimes it's right to say, 'I'll have to look into that and get back to you.' Nevertheless, it's vital that we are regularly opening the Scriptures and reflecting on the questions it raises so that we are ready to help the spiritually open. My new book addresses the kinds of difficult issues that often arise when people engage with the Bible, including warfare in the Old Testament and teaching about sex in the New Testament (see God's Book: An Honest Look at the Bible's 7 Toughest Topics). Along with The Bible Course, perhaps this could be your way to feel equipped and ready? The Quiet Revival research found that 35% of young people inside the church said their faith is undermined when they read certain parts of the Bible. That's an alarming statistic. We must help each other grow in confidence in the Scriptures – our mission depends on it.

3. BE OPEN TO THE STRANGER

The story in Acts 8 concludes with an unlikely scene: Philip baptising an Ethiopian VIP by the roadside. Then they went their separate ways. However, the African businessman was never the same again. He went home and shared the gospel with his people. Through his witness, the Ethiopian church was founded, and it continues to this day. We have no idea of the ramifications when we share Jesus.

It must have taken courage for Philip to embrace this stranger who was so different from him – a wealthy dignitary from a foreign country who had been sexually altered. However, Philip knew that Jesus came to reach people who are very different from us. Without compromising on the truth, we need to reach out to those who are different to us and not allow our prejudices to get in the way of what God is doing. I suspect that God's work in the world is only going to get stranger. So, we must be ready to welcome the stranger.

Coming down the road are more and more curious seekers who may not have our background or know how to talk or behave as we would like. But Christ died for his enemies and now he calls us to reach those who are lost and searching. Are we prepared to leave our comfort zone, sit alongside them, and share Jesus from the Scriptures?

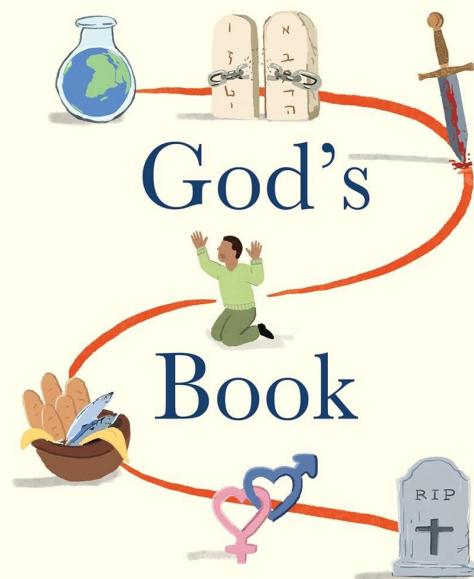


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Andrew is a theologian, pastor, and the author of The Bible Course. This article links to Andrew's latest book: God's Book: An Honest Look at the Bible's 7 Toughest Topics (Hodder).

"Wise answers to challenging questions. Hugely helpful!"
Bear Grylls

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