

"So what do you think about that piece in the Indy?" (see: <http://www.missoulanews.com/index.cfm?do=article.details&id=F3E1EE20-9859-104A-0CDC6FAAE5341451>)

We've been getting that question a lot lately, not just from folks here in Missoula, but from people who are following along from afar, who read the article back before Christmas when the Missoula Independent wrote a feature on what we're doing here at the Missoula Project.

Many were encouraged, a few folks expressed some concern, and almost everyone wanted our take. So that's the purpose of this update, to shed light on how we process something like this - not just 'what we think', but also 'why we think it' (plus 'why we said some of those things in the first place'). Hopefully it'll be helpful.

One of the first things I want to say has to do with *expectations*. It's extremely important to remember who's writing this article, and who she's writing it to. In this case, the author was Jessie McQuillen, a really good 26 year old journalist who's very well respected here in Missoula. Jessie is one of the few people I would trust to write a story like this. But here's the key - she's not a Christian, and she's writing to an audience that is not Christian. Consequently, we shouldn't expect her to act (or write) like one. We shouldn't be surprised if her perspective differs from ours.

After all, what does the Apostle Paul tell us about people who don't follow Jesus? "They don't accept the things of God, because they're foolishness; they *cannot* understand, because they are *spiritually* discerned" (1 Cor 2:14). (Want to experience this for yourself? Ask your non-Christian friends to follow you around for a week and then describe your faith - you'll be amazed at some of the things they say. Part of this is because they can't really get it, and part if this is because we often communicate something other than what we think we're saying). Consequently, we need to temper our expectations. We also need to learn how to say what we believe in a way that the people we are speaking to don't simply misunderstand it (more on that later).

So what *are* our expectations for an article like this? At the very least, we hope she won't simply caricature us (I don't think she did). We also hope that she'll follow us around, sit in on all kinds of things, listen to us talk, ask lots of questions (she did all of that). If I was a reporter, I'd want to talk to people who knew us well, but still don't buy it - so we gave her names (with one exception, every negative viewpoint in the article comes from a reference we provided). More importantly, we encouraged her to look beyond the things we do (our methodology) and seek to understand the beliefs (the content) that drives what we do (between the two of us, Ryan and I spent 3-4 hours talking about this very thing - what is our gospel? how does it shape our methodology? A friend of ours wryly noted: "She says a lot about community, but not much about Jesus" - which is true, but we can't write the article for her - the best we can do is make sure she hears about Jesus from us. and she did).

At the end of the day, we encourage her to write whatever she wants (she did), and we reassure her that no matter what she says about us, she's always welcome as our friend (she is). Our only real hope is that God will be glorified, even if she doesn't intend for that (and we think he was). We would love for her to do an expose on how scandalous this gospel thing really is (and if we don't think the gospel is scandalous, maybe we haven't really seen the gospel). At the end of the day, this is my one critique of her article - I don't think she really got at that (see my comments on [Scandalized](#)).

But that's ok. Because the thing that matters most to us is this - "Will what she writes damage our efforts to reach unbelievers here?" (in other words, will what she says hurt any of the relationships we've spent the last year building?) And the answer to that has been a resounding "No!" We have had tons of unbelieving friends call us up to say, "Hey, this is great to see you guys finally getting some press!" Here's an example of what I'm talking about:

Hey guys - Congratulations on what I see as a mostly to very positive article in the Indy. It's very cool to see you guys on the front cover, all around town, during Christmas week. That's a

blissing in and of itself for obvious reasons.

I think Jessie did a very good job. She was fair, objective and seems to have done her homework. I feel like the article officially puts the Missoula Project on the map. It's almost like she's serving notice that we are here and constitute a force to be reckoned with.

And that's coming from something of a liberal intellectual/former rugged individualist/ former bulletproof college drop-out who has many friends that might be described as burned-out hippies...

Did you notice the 'we' in there? That's coming from an unbeliever, someone who would NOT describe himself as a Christian, but who nevertheless sees himself as a part of the Missoula Project! How is that possible? Are we somehow dumbing down the concept of church, so that anyone can be a part of it, even if they don't believe in Jesus? That's a really good question, and here's the answer.

When it comes to people who are outside the church, it's extremely important to realize the context. When missionaries travel to the jungles of Africa, it's pretty obvious that they're going to need to translate their message into the local dialect. What's not so obvious is that we need to do the same thing right here in our own backyards. Here's what I mean. We are increasingly becoming an unchurched nation - actually, unchurched isn't quite the right term; *de-churched* is much more accurate. We are surrounded by people who have had some connection with the church in the distant past, but whose understandings of church (and Jesus) are actually very superficial.

And that presents a problem - because most of the people we are speaking to *think* they know what church is, what Jesus is, what things like faith and grace are. In fact, however, they don't understand it at all (and neither do many people who think they are Christians), because much of what passes for Christianity these days simply isn't. And much of the terminology carries all kinds of cultural baggage. If we don't take this into account, however, we can end up saying things that make sense to us, but don't mean anything to the people we are talking to (or worse, they mean something completely different than what we intend).

Here's an example - when Ryan and I mention that we're here to start a church, one of the first questions people ask is: "So where's your building? When do you worship?" See the assumption in that (that church is something that happens at a place and time)? We try to respond by saying that we think church is much bigger than just a building, it's much more than just a service, it's meant to be a community, one that functions all week long.

We see these same sorts of misconceptions in all sorts of areas, which is one of the reason we go to great efforts not to speak in Christian-eze - we're intentionally trying to say things in ways that don't fit the stereotypes of unbelievers. This means we speak creatively, and we also speak provocatively. We are not trying to communicate the entire message ("here's what we believe...") - we're much more interested in trying to create an opportunity for further dialog, a conversation that can last a long time. Because when it comes to Jesus, there's a lot that needs to be said. Salvation is much richer than four spiritual laws. This is why we speak provocatively, in ways that will spawn more questions. Similarly, we try to answer the questions that people aren't articulating (the questions behind their questions). Do this well, and people will be demanding you to explain yourself. It's kind of cool to have someone interrupt you saying, "Wait, I don't want to talk about me! I want to hear what you guys believe..."

This is part of the reason why we'll say something like what you read in the article - "you shouldn't trust anyone you can't have a beer with." Are we saying we don't associate with people who don't drink? Of course not! (After all, we've got folks here who are teetotalers). We say this to be provocative - we know that many people here would never *dream* of having a beer with a pastor (let alone telling him they like to drink at all), because for many people, beer and faith aren't supposed to mix. And we want to challenge that stereotype, by saying, "We think you ought to be

able to be honest about the fact that you like beer - if you can't, what kind of relationship is that?" Most people not only get what we're saying, they appreciate it. Our willingness to meet people on their own turf, without accusing or demanding them to change, creates space for gospel conversations.

The same thing is true of statements like "We won't try and convert you. We don't think we can - only God can change someone's heart." We say this not only because it's true (that's Calvinism folks!), but because we want to communicate to these folks that we don't think of them as a project - our goal is not to come in and make them look, act, and think like us (and to heck with them if they won't!). Few of us would ever verbalize those things, but what many of us fail to realize is how often we inadvertently communicate that very thing, by failing to realize how people are hearing us (I never realized this myself until I had unbelieving friends who started to tell me what they were hearing). So our goal is to emphasize that we are willing to accept people where they are, to receive them as our friends regardless of whether they agree with us about God or not. We are willing to love them simply because they are created in God's image - we're not going to demand that they be conformed to ours in order to be accepted.

So what ARE we doing here? I like to tell people we're creating a community of faith (in Jesus), but it's one where you don't have to believe in order to belong. It's a community based on friendship, not agreement. You don't have to have it all figured out in order to say "hey, this is a group that I'm a part of." Does that mean we're going to accept unbelievers for membership in the church (once it's formed)? Of course not! We would never dream of asking unbelievers to do something like that - how disrespectful, when they don't have an allegiance to Jesus or Scripture! But should people like this feel welcome in our churches? Absolutely! (And Paul assumes that there will be unbelievers in our services, btw - cf. 1 Cor 14:23 - if they're not, we're probably doing something wrong).

So we want to assume that there will always be unbelievers in our midst, we want them to know that they are welcome (even if they don't agree), and that this is a safe place for them to be honest about their convictions - to say what they think, what they don't, and why.

This kind of attitude is exactly why people who don't buy Jesus seem so interested in the Missoula Project. It's not because we're not talking about Jesus. It's because we're talking about Jesus in a way most of them have never experienced from church folks before. We don't proselytize, we don't speak down to people, we listen respectfully, we try to honestly answer any questions they might have (even if those answers might make them reject the very Jesus we embrace). And most people really appreciate that. This is why the guy I quoted above - I'll call him Mitch - continues to be a part of what we're doing.

We met Mitch nearly nine months ago - we had coffee, then lunch, then he came to a party, he and his wife came over for dinner. He asked lots of questions, and we gave him lots of space. We allowed him to be himself around us, and we were ourselves around him. Back in October, he actually came to our first Explorers Group. And then he came back again. And again. And again. And when it was all over, he was one of our most vocal supporters when we hosted vision dinners in early December. Speaking to the group, he said this: *"Now you guys know that I've got a lot of problems with Jesus, and I'm pretty skeptical about this Christianity thing, but I am so excited about the Missoula Project thing because I want a place where my kids can safely learn about faith and not get anything shoved down their throats, and I really believe this is it."*

Mitch went on to attend our community groups (which started shortly after Jessie's article was published), and he continues to play a vital role. Two weeks ago, we compared the Christian story of the prodigal sons (Luke 15) with the Buddhist version (yes, there is a Buddhist version - the lost son is accepted back only he has proven himself by working his way up his father's corporate ladder!). Jim, one of our new people (who sees himself as a Christian, and who found us through Jessie's story) said he thought the parables were basically the same.

It was so cool to see Mitch (the avowed unbeliever!) gently yet firmly take him to task: "*It is so obvious to me that in Buddhism its up to you to work your way back, but in Christianity, all you do is repent and go home to the father. And that is so much more attractive to me.*" He actually prayed for his mother during prayer time, and his wife asked us to pray for a friend she keeps inviting.

Why do I share this? To demonstrate how God uses this crazy approach of ours. We really don't try to convert people. We simply invite them into our lives and be ourselves around them (and as Christians, being ourselves means that we talk about Jesus all the time, and our own need for the gospel on a daily basis). Some people will pull themselves out of this process (because they really don't like the challenge of Jesus). But many people, people like Mitch, are deeply attracted by it - there's no pressure, they can be themselves, and they inevitably end up dealing with Jesus more than with us. And Jesus is fundamentally attractive. He loves us enough to meet us where we are, but he loves us so much he'll never leave us where we are either.

I don't know if Mitch is converted yet (he might be), but what I do know is that something is happening - he's encountering the Jesus of Scripture, and it's Jesus who's impacting him. I have no idea where he'll end up, but I'm optimistic that he'll come to Christ. And I'm thankful that Jessie wrote the article she did, not because she said everything perfectly, but because she said something well enough to put us on the radar, to give us a voice where we wouldn't have had it otherwise. There were four people at our gathering last week who found us because of this article. We've got 8-10 people are interested in starting a second explorers group here in a few weeks. God is doing stuff, often in spite of us, and he's getting glory because of it. That's why I'm encouraged.

I'll close with a final quote, this from a personal email Jessie sent me a week or two ago:
Hi Christian,

Thanks for dropping me a line and I'm glad to hear you liked the story---glad to hear you're getting good feedback, and I saw lots of discussion on the Indy website, so that's good too. It's always nerve wracking to put a piece like that out there because it's difficult to strike a right balance and it's inevitable that some (if not most) won't think I did it right, so I'm glad you didn't hate it.

I'm actually in Bangkok Thailand right now, where I came on Christmas Eve with my husband, who's competing in the World Debate Tournament, which is being held here this year. It's a pretty crazy place but very fascinating, although I'm looking forward to getting out of the city and going to the quiet beach in a few days.

Anyway, I really enjoyed getting to know you and Ryan a little bit and thanks again for letting me into your lives. I would like to keep in touch when I get home---not til mid January--because I am personally interested in the community building work you're up to. It touches on an issue that I've been thinking a lot about---my personal community as well as Missoula's---lately and I'm interested to keep thinking and talking about it in months to come.

This is why I'm optimistic - because I see God working in people's lives all around us. He's the one who builds his church. Our job is just to engage people relationally, to point them back to Christ. In closing, I'd like to ask a couple of favors:

1. if you have questions or concerns, please pick up the phone and talk to us about them - please don't talk about us to others. Go to the source, let us know what you think.
2. please pray for the people I've mentioned in this email - and pray for us, that we'd say the right thing at the right time
3. finally, pray for conversions - that God would meet people where they are, and change their hearts, that he would give them the faith to believe

Thanks so much for listening! Sorry to run so long...

Christian

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"Coffee? I could quit anytime, just not today"

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