

Where Do You Stand on God...?

Please Note: *This article uses language related to God, faith and spirituality that may offend some people. It is not my intention to do so, or to "bring religion into schools" that don't want it, but to share personal experiences, and professional insights, that have shaped my work.*

In public/secular schools, I do not raise or talk about the subject of God or religion. In faith-based, religious, and First Nations schools, I will share my faith when asked to do so. However, I have also seen some results from "talking about God" that have puzzled me - and have had fewer kids attending and completing the Power of Choice program (more below).

Thanks for reading this.

Scott Gallagher

This is a really difficult subject for me to write about.

It's difficult because it invokes such controversy. Some schools won't even bring me in if I talk about God. They ask me up front, "Are you a 12-stepper? Are you going to talk about religion?" They want to make sure I won't preach to their kids, or try to enforce my beliefs about religion on others. (And I don't.)

On the other side of the spectrum, there are schools that do want me to talk to their students about God. They want to make sure I share the same faith, and that my message is aligned with their beliefs and values. So they ask me up front, "Do you believe in God, Scott? Are you a Christian?" (And yes, I am.)

So what's a speaker to do?

I have no idea what kind of faith or beliefs you have. But whether you're with a public school, a Christian school, or a different kind entirely, I want to give you something of value here - so that you'll better understand my program and know that I approach the subject of "God" in a responsible way.

And that's the purpose of this article: to let you know "Where do I stand on God?", how I approach this subject in schools, and why.

My Commitment is to Helping Kids - and Serving You

My most basic commitment is to making a difference with kids who are suffering and struggling from addictions and destructive habits. Having been there personally, I know the kind of pain they're in. And it matters to me to be able to reach and help them.

My commitment is also to honouring YOU and your values. Some schools are not comfortable with me talking about God, so I don't. Some schools would like me to talk about God, so I do.

I deliver my program in all kinds of schools: secular, Christian, First Nations, and alternative. So I'm comfortable talking in whatever "language" serves you and your kids best. My bottom line is, if I don't get to speak in a school, I don't get to help your kids. So I work within your guidelines.

Having spoken now in over 200 schools – about 60% secular, 40% faith-based/Christian – what I've discovered is that this program works regardless of belief. I've also seen some impacts from talking about "God" that have puzzled me, and I think this feedback will be useful for schools that value their faith.

The Content of My Program

The Power of Choice and Healthy Habits program incorporates steps that worked for me in my own recovery from multiple addictions. Things like doing exercise and drinking water. Rigorous honesty. Making amends or apologies to those we've wronged or hurt. Focusing on what's "right" instead of "what's wrong." Being accountable, and helping others.

For me, these ideas came from many sources, including the Bible, treatment centres, Alcoholics Anonymous, top motivational speakers, other spiritual wisdom/paths, and authorities on addictions and recovery. I use whatever has worked for me, and whatever I have seen work for others.

Just so you know, the Power of Choice is not a 12-step-based program. It utilizes elements from many sources in a way that's inclusive to all people, regardless of their beliefs or non beliefs in God or spirituality. However, my own recovery was helped greatly by going through AA and other 12 step programs. I also started a non-profit, 12-step-based organization, some years ago, that now serves people around the world who are suffering from any and all compulsive habits and addictions. So I do have strong roots in that community.

While I deeply value my faith, I do not want to let the subject of God stand in the way of anything we can do to help our kids. My approach is to accept that some people believe and some people don't, but not to make anyone wrong for their beliefs. Just because I believe in God doesn't make my views superior, or inferior, to yours. It's just what is.

We might even share some very similar beliefs, but our language and upbringing make us think otherwise. Where I use the words "spirituality" or "faith", you might use different words like "life," "integrity" or "character education." So rather than create walls between us, I look for what's common to all paths and religions, what honours and respect your beliefs—and most importantly, what works for the kids that I teach.

"God" in My Own Life

God has been an important part of my life since I was an early teen. I gave my life to Jesus around the age of 12, was baptized a Christian, and I've been on a spiritual journey ever since. (I know that's hard for some people to read, but I don't mean to 'push it in your face.' It's just my experience.)

Just because I believed in God, however, didn't mean I was free of serious addictions. I had them for many years. I even remember reading the Bible one night in a hotel room while I was smoking crack cocaine over and over again. Doing my best to get clean and sober, I was totally studying the word of God, but still couldn't find a way out.

Two or three years after my recovery from drugs/alcohol in a treatment centre, I wanted to rededicate my life to Christ, so I got baptized under water again. It was an amazing experience. Yet even after that, I still wasn't

wholly peaceful inside, and remained addicted to other things like coffee, cigarettes, sex (I don't talk about that in schools), junk food, TV and the Internet. Yes, you can be a Christian and still be addicted.

My Most Profound Experience was Saying I'm Sorry...

Around that same time, I met a Christian man who was 100 years old. He taught me that one of the main reasons I was still addicted was that I hadn't made right the wrongs I'd done in my life. The guilt was still in my heart. So he did a prayer with me on the phone, and told me to write down whatever thoughts were in my head afterwards.

One of the thoughts I had was "Dempster's Bread." It turned out that I still felt guilty about something that happened 20 years earlier. While working for Dempster's Bread bakery, I had stolen from them, lied about how many hours I worked, and never paid them back. Another thought that came up in our prayer was "York University." When I was a student there (more than 20 years ago), I had stolen thousands of dollars worth of recording studio equipment. I never got caught, never returned it, and never paid it back—and I still had some guilt around that too.

So after talking and praying with this Christian man, I went to Dempster's Bread and confessed to what I did. Later the same day, I went to the Dean's office at York University and confessed to what I had done there as well. They even brought police officers into the office who took my statement. But here's the bottom line.

When I left York University that day, I didn't know if I was going to go to jail or what was going to happen. But as soon as I walked out the door, I started bawling my eyes out. I was crying because I felt the presence of God inside in a real and powerful way. And it had come from being willing to tell people what I had done.

Even though I was a "Christian," I had been confused about God and had a lack of faith. But after making these amends (and asking God before going in, "Please give me the courage to make these amends, because I can't do it"), I had such a powerful experience of God that I broke down and cried from the joy, peace and pure love I felt inside. My most profound spiritual experience hadn't come from reading the Bible or believing in God. It came out of nowhere from simply doing the right thing.

God is Important in Some Places

As I write this, I'm in the southern United States. I've just spoken at schools in New Mexico and Arkansas, and last week I did some in Texas as well. There are some strong Christian values down here, and that's totally awesome.

Last week, I was in Alberta, Canada and did my talk and workshops at a Seventh Day Adventist church. I had spoken at their school last year, and they'd loved the program and the results so much that they decided to bring me back. This time, rather than just work with kids, they wanted me to offer my Power of Choice program to the whole community.

In all these places, they said to me, "Feel free to speak about God, Scott," and I did. And it was amazing to be able to freely share my convictions about God and Christ with them. But something else happened.

In Alberta, the adults and kids who came to my follow-up workshops weren't the ones with the most serious

problems. The ones who were struggling the most – I can tell this by looking in their eyes – didn't attend. Those people who (I think) had drugs problems and other, more severe issues didn't choose to stay for the whole program.

The same thing happened in the schools in the southern U.S. A smaller-than-normal percentage of kids came for help on how to break a bad habit; and the kids who came were different. They weren't the ones who were really, really suffering or hurting. Their issues were less serious, and they were mostly kids who already had pretty good lives and were in pretty good shape.

I've now seen this same result consistently—that whenever I'm asked to speak openly about God, there's a downside. Because when I talk this way, what ends up happening is I get less response from the people who really need the help.

Who My Program is For

My program is designed to attract everyone who wants to come. If you're in a secular school, just know that I won't be talking about God or faith anyway, so this won't be an issue for you.

If yours is a religious school and I do talk about God, the kids who come to my follow-up workshops may be primarily the happier ones who are looking for a little coaching on building healthy habits, and that's great. It's for them too, and I'm grateful for that.

However, if I'm not attracting the "bad asses" – the toughest guy in the school that everybody is afraid of because he hurts everyone, or the kid at another school who told me, "I'm here because I'm addicted to stabbing people with knives" – then I'm not being of maximum service. And that's my desire from my 12 step background: "to be of maximum service to God and the people about me."

So here's the paradox. I respect those schools who openly express their faith, and I love being able to speak freely about God and Christ. But if I notice that every time I talk this way, I don't attract all the kids who really need help, then I'd rather do it a different way. Not to take "God" out, but to be more discerning about how to bring Him in. Because what's important is how to reach these kids - and how to get them results that they really feel are 'miraculous.'

How The Program Works

My entire program is like a funnel. First, I speak to a large audience, like a school assembly or a community event. After that, I give two workshops for people who want more in-depth help with their addictions and destructive habits.

Each time, the numbers 'funnel' down. About 10 to 15% of those in the big audience will come to my first workshop, to learn how to break a bad habit. After that, a smaller number will stay for the second workshop, where I give more detailed steps on replacing unhealthy habits with healthy ones, and set up an ongoing 'healthy habits community.' This is a minimum 28-day program (that's done after I leave), where people help each other on a daily basis and get together once a week to share their experiences.

These follow-up sessions are where the 'real work' gets done. Schools that report success with the program

tell me that it's these two workshops, and the 28 day program, where they see attitudes and behaviours really start to change. Kids' self esteem and energy increase. They feel better about themselves and connect more with others. As this happens, their need to escape their emotional pain inside – through doing their bad habits and addictions – diminishes. They start building 'healthy habits' like drinking water, doing exercise, making apologies, and taking steps towards improvements at school. And they also begin monitoring and reducing their unhealthy habits on a gradual basis.

But whenever I talk about God, two things happen: 1) After the main talk, statistically lower percentages of people come out to the bad habits workshop; and 2) Even fewer stay for workshop and become part of the ongoing healthy habits community. That means fewer people are actually getting the practical help they need to break their bad habits. And that's important to me.

So Why Do Fewer Kids Come Out - When I Talk about God?

To be honest, I don't know. But here's my best sense on what may be happening. (And again, let me re-state that the Power of Choice is not a 12-step program; I'm just using this as an example.)

In AA and the 12 steps, the first step is to admit we are powerless over our addictions and that our life has become unmanageable. Rather than introducing the concept of God right away (that's step 3), the program starts slowly by having people look at the impact their destructive habits are having on their life, and admitting they need some help. It also gives them time to develop trust in the program and in each other. And I think this gives us some important clues about how to be most effective.

In this society, our views about God are very complex. Even people in the same religion have very different perspectives and beliefs. And it's especially true for kids (and adults) who are suffering from addictive or destructive behaviours. Many of them have really warped views about God. Some hate the idea altogether. Others think that God did this to them, or that He is going to punish them for their bad behaviours. And many have felt judged (or believe they are going to be) by people who talk openly about God. This may be why introducing the concept of God too early isn't appropriate, or effective. Kids just don't trust us enough to expose some of their deepest secrets and most vulnerable places within.

What I've found from speaking to thousands of kids and adults – and working one-to-one with hundreds of addicts with different problems – is that we've got to be sensitive about how to bring God into the conversation. Otherwise, we can scare people off and lose them. And I definitely don't want to do that.

So How Do I Best Serve YOU?

As a school speaker, I am there to support you. I'd rather come into your school or community, by honouring your values and beliefs, and help one child rather than none at all. But I think I'm there to do more than that.

If bringing God up 'too strongly or too soon' is preventing us from reaching all the kids who want and need help, then maybe we need to discern more carefully about how and when to bring up the subject.

What I've noticed in my keynote assemblies is that kids get drawn in when I tell them my story: what my addictions were, what choices and decisions I made, how I destroyed my life, and the actions I took to recover. I may not say much (or anything) about God while sharing these stories, unless moved to do so by the Spirit.

But once kids trust me and believe I'm authentically there to help, they're more likely to come to my workshops. And then, when the time is right, together we can talk about God.

Do We Have to Believe in God to Recover?

Many people have different beliefs about this, so I'm not here to say what's right or wrong. However it's useful to go back to the roots of AA – the most powerful recovery movement on the planet for the last 70-plus years – and consider their experience.

Even Dr. Bob Smith, the co-founder of Alcoholics Anonymous and a staunch believer in God, discovered that his religious convictions and practices (i.e. prayer and church) weren't enough to gain recovery. He had repeatedly tried and failed. Much the same can be said about the many ministers, rabbis and faithful churchgoers who find themselves mired in addictions and bad habits.

What AA discovered is that it's taking the action-steps (contained in all the 12 steps) that actually brings the results. Recovery comes from looking at who we've hurt or wronged, making amends, living a life of honesty and being willing to help others, regardless of what "higher power" we believe in. And these are what brought Dr. Bob 'the vital spiritual experience' of his own recovery.

So that's my focus with kids—teaching and supporting them in taking practical, "what can I do today" steps that will help them recover. It's what my workshops and 28-day healthy community program are designed to do.

This isn't an excuse for shying away from the subject of God. As the Big Book of AA says, "When it will serve any good purpose, we are willing to announce our convictions with tact and common sense." But the book also suggests that we let our actions, rather than our words, speak for us. For example, if we're making an apology to someone for something we've done, we don't go and say, "Hey, I found Jesus" and preach God to them. What we need to say is, "I stole from you, and I'm here willing to pay it back."

The Power of Our Actions

While I was driving to another school recently, I was listening to Joyce Meyer on the radio. (For those who don't know her, Joyce is an amazingly powerful and practical teacher of the Bible on radio and TV, and the author of over 80 books.) And that day, she said something like this. "If we, as Christians, are going into communities to feed the poor, we don't need to be preaching to them about Christ. What we need to do is feed them. We need to be Christians." In other words, if their basic needs aren't being met, don't preach to them right now. They need food. So let's just give them that.

I see that as a parallel to my work with kids in schools. They need something right now. What they need to know is there's a way out of their destructive habits; and there are actions they can take, regardless of what they believe, to help them accomplish that. We can never force them to believe in God. But we can show them the love of Christ by serving their present need, and giving them ways to reduce the drugs, cigarettes, bullying, self harm or other destructive behaviours they're experiencing.

In one school I've worked with, 11 out of 12 kids got off of cigarettes and marijuana within 90 days of my presenting there. I didn't talk about God there. If I had, maybe they wouldn't even have shown up. So for me

the question is, what serves them most? Is it speaking the Word more and perhaps scaring them away, or being sensitive to their needs and having more of them attend?

If You're Considering Me as a Speaker...

So here's what I want to tell you if you are considering booking me as a speaker. If you're a public/secular school, rest assured that I will honour your values and not be preaching to kids.

If you're a faith-based school, yes, I am a Christian. And I'm there to serve you. My job is to honour your beliefs, your values and your culture in the best way I can. But it's also my responsibility to make a difference with your students and to tell you honestly what works. And that's why I feel I need to warn you. If you want me to speak freely about God, I'll do so passionately and gratefully. But there is also a consequence. The follow-up program will likely attract fewer people, and it may not be the kids who really need the help or the ones you would most want to have there.

I don't know how God is going to touch people. But that's not my business. Mine is to show people a way out of destructive habits, compulsions and addictions. How to develop healthy habits, have higher self esteem, honour their word and live with integrity. And through doing that, I believe God will touch them.

If our real, shared purpose is to "be of maximum service to God and the people about us," then what's the best thing for your students? It's not an easy question to answer. But I think we need to be guided by both our faith, and from the results that we are getting. And God does indeed work in mysterious ways.

The program is called The Power of Choice, and to me that means give people the power to choose. So the choice is up to you. May God's will, not ours, be done in your decision making. And thanks for hearing me out.