

What Skeptics Want Christians to Know

First appeared in *The Christian Research Journal*

Sean McDowell, Ph.D.

Recently I had one of the most interesting and memorable evenings in a long time. For two and a half hours, I had a dialogue with fourteen skeptics, atheists, and agnostics from a freethought organization based in Southern California, close to where I live. There were both men and women ranging in age from 22 to 80 years old who shared one core value—their rejection of God. Despite our obvious worldview differences, we were able to have an amicable evening where we built some common ground and clarified our positions on a host of issues.

You may be wondering how this came about and why I would want to have such a dialogue. Many of my friends thought I was crazy for even trying to engage skeptics in a conversation. I'm thankful that I didn't heed their advice or I would have lost the opportunity to begin some unique relationships and learn how skeptics view Christians. This group of people tends to have a low high regard for religion in general and Christians in particular, yet because I refused to shrink away from this dicey opportunity, I was able to show them the love of Christ.ⁱ

The idea for this conversation came from a book I recently co-wrote on the New Atheism.ⁱⁱ The purpose of the book is to give readers the tools necessary to respond to the toughest questions raised by the New Atheists but without the typical rancor and divisiveness that so often characterizes such exchanges. Much of the contemporary dialogue in both politics and apologetics tends to be emotion-filled and based upon stereotypes, misunderstandings, and straw man arguments. As a result, opposite sides tend to build more walls than bridges and approach interaction with rigid preconceived ideas. Undoubtedly, we could make more progress if we toned down the conversation and treated others the way we would want them to treat us. Our goal in the book was to take atheists' objections seriously, but to respond with "gentleness and respect," as Peter counsels (1 Peter 3:15). We hoped to answer their critiques while modeling *how* to engage nonbelievers lovingly.

Since Christians seem to be the primary readers of Christian books, I wondered how I could get non-Christians to seriously entertain the arguments of the book. How could I *really* reach out to atheists? After all, that was one of the main reasons we wrote it. Then the idea hit me. The book is about personally engaging skeptics, so why don't I put the message into practice and actually try to converse with atheists? So, I emailed my idea to Bruce, the leader of the freethought group, wondering if he would share my enthusiasm. We had met a couple times before, once at my debate with Dr. James Corbett last year on God and morality, so I thought he might be favorable to my request. To my pleasant surprise, he loved the idea! And he was especially enthusiastic about having a civil conversation where each side could share their perspective, objections, frustrations, and grievances with the other.

As soon as we set a date for the evening, different thoughts started to plague my mind, “What have I gotten myself into? Am I ready for this? What objections will they raise? Am I the best person for this?” Needless to say, I prayed a lot for a tender heart and a quick mind.

Bruce began the evening by expressing his amazement that I would come to such an event. From his perspective, few Christians are willing to voluntarily sit on the “hot seat” with a group of skeptics. He may be right. While I appreciated the compliment, it actually saddened me: Why aren’t Christians regularly going to skeptics meetings? Why aren’t we pursuing such opportunities? What are we afraid of?

Some of the questions the skeptics asked were predictable while others caught me off guard. They ranged from my view on stem cell research to separation of church and state as well as the common ground shared by atheists and Christians. They were very cordial, respectful, and quite interested in what I had to say. Bruce even began the evening by giving me permission *not* to answer any question that made me feel uncomfortable. While I passed on the offer, it was a very gracious gesture.

After doing my best to answer their questions, I turned the tables and asked some questions of my own. Rather than trying to “nail” them with tough apologetic questions (as some of my friends suggested) I wanted to build common ground and try to understand how they perceive Christians. Following are some of the questions I asked them and how they responded. I don’t necessarily agree with all their responses, but there are some powerful lessons here that Christians need to take to heart. These are not direct quotes, but my best reconstructions of the heart of what they sharedⁱⁱⁱ:

SEAN: WHAT BAD IMPRESSIONS DO CHRISTIANS LEAVE?

- “Hypocrisy. Christians often focus on particular sins such as homosexuality while they are committing other egregious sins in their own lives.” The young man who shared this mentioned that some of his Christian friends regularly get drunk but also frequently condemn homosexuality as immoral.
- “Christians don’t take their religion seriously. Why don’t they read, study, and follow the Bible if they really believe it is a word from the almighty God?”
- “Christians often criticize me for not having good reasons for what I believe, but when pressed, they can’t provide evidence for their beliefs either. They should at least be consistent and admit this.”

WHAT BLIND SPOTS DO CHRISTIANS HAVE?

- “Christians are often rational in all areas of their lives but they stop thinking critically when they enter church.”
- “Christians notice the faults in others but not in themselves. William Lobdell pointed this out in his book *Losing My Religion*.”
- “Christians often discourage questions once they think they have the truth. In fact, knowing truth tends to silence further inquiry.”

HOW CAN CHRISTIANS IMPROVE THEIR INTERACTIONS WITH ATHEISTS?

- “Listen” (an older woman immediately offered up this response)
- “Have more open dialogue like tonight.”
- “Stop looking at atheists as if they are wearing a scarlet letter.”
- “Don’t associate beliefs with the person. I criticize Christianity and Christians often get defensive.”
- “Stop making slanderous remarks about non-Christians. I grew up in church and heard more cheap shots made at atheists than any other group.”

WHAT EVIDENCE FOR GOD WOULD BE COMPELLING TO ATHEISTS?

- “If ‘Yahweh’ appeared in 200-mile-long letters in space I might be convinced. I would still need to investigate it though.”
- “If Christians could actually provide an argument for the existence of God that was not either wrong factually, mistaken logically, or based upon emotional manipulation.”
- “If God would eliminate suffering.”

I listened to their concerns and did my best to articulate the Christian position as clearly and graciously as I could. My goal was not to persuade them that Christianity is true in the course of the evening, but “to put a stone in their shoe,” as apologist Greg Koukl often says.^{iv} In fact, rather than defining success as persuading them on any particular issue, I hoped to show them that Christians are thoughtful, compassionate, and likeable.

The evening was a smashing success. My final question for them regarded their impressions of our time together. The responses were overwhelmingly positive. Comments included, “When can we do this again?” and “Why don’t we do this more often?” I don’t mean to imply that this type of event will *always* be as positive. A few skeptics who couldn’t be there posted some very condescending remarks about me the following day. One even compared my efforts to teach young people apologetics with child abuse! There may be some with no interest in dialogue, but there are many who are.

The next morning I received an email from one of the younger skeptics who grew up in a southern Baptist church but has since rejected his Christian roots. He is now a philosophy major at a local university. The subject heading was titled, “Kindred spirit.” He opened his email by saying “I first want to thank you for the engaging and thoughtful discussion that you provided. Throughout my history I have found few ‘men of the cloth’ to be as open about philosophical discourse and criticism as you were last night.” Then he asked if we could meet up for further discussion.

A few weeks later we met over fish tacos to debate and discuss all sorts of apologetics topics. He showed up having already read my entire book and brought a small notebook filled with questions and challenges for me. What fun! He had some

thoughtful objections related to the moral argument, intelligent design, and the problem of evil. I did my best to answer his objections but also shot back some tough questions of my own. While he didn't become a Christian during our discussion (again, that *wasn't* my goal), he did end up embracing the existence of objective moral values—a significant step! I challenged him to hypothesize a way to account for objective morality apart from God. I'm already anxiously anticipating what he will put forward at our next discussion. Through this discourse I have gained a new friend who motivates me to think critically about my faith, and hopefully I challenge him to think through his beliefs as well.

Probably the highlight of the evening came towards the end. Bruce had intentionally set aside some time for us to share our grievances with each other. He began by asking me to share my grievances with atheists. In other words, what are my problems and frustrations with atheists? I could tell he had a few gripes against Christians that he was anxious to share! But instead of taking the bait, I shared about my atheist friends and family members who I dearly love. Rather than lumping all atheists into a group and stereotyping them, I told them that I loved atheists. That's right, I had the opportunity to share my love for atheists with a group of skeptics *on their own turf*. And I meant it. Then I said, "My problem is not with atheists but with atheism. It's a false worldview."

I don't share this to give myself a pat on the back. It's not about *me*. It's about Christians learning to follow Peter's command to be ready with an answer for what we believe and to present it with gentleness and respect (1 Peter 3:15). We practice apologetics simply out of faithfulness to God, trusting that He will use our efforts for His ultimate good.

This experience has utterly convinced me that apologetics is more critical today than ever. But we cannot apply apologetics in the same manner that we've always done it in the past. We need to be creative and think outside of the box to effectively reach a younger generation that is pluralistic and secular in their thinking. Each one of us has a responsibility to reach out in our sphere of influence and engage non-believers with the gospel. Here are some principles I learned during my interaction with skeptics that may be helpful to you:

First, **many atheists are interested in genuine dialogue with Christians**. The skeptics at the event genuinely wanted to know what I thought about a variety of issues. They were quick to offer rebuttals to my arguments, but they first wanted to hear what I believed and why I believed it. Since I came with the willingness to listen to them, they responded with the same geniality. The tone of the entire evening was cordial. In fact, the most heated moment came between two skeptics!

Second, **worldview assumptions are powerful**. I asked what evidence they would consider compelling. One of the skeptics said if God wrote 'Yahweh' in 200-mile-long letters in the sky that *might* get his attention. In fact, he would still have to investigate it. He was convinced that a natural explanation would eventually be

found for even this unique occurrence. Only *one* skeptic in the entire group agreed this would be compelling. If this is how they would view a present day miracle they witnessed with their own eyes, then no wonder they doubt the resurrection! My question for my skeptical friends is whether they apply their own degree of skepticism to their own skeptical outlook—the basis of their worldview. They are skeptical about God, the Bible, miracles, and other realms of life, but I doubt whether they are equally skeptical about their skeptical approach to life. My hunch is they are not. And I like to point this out to them. Years ago William Dembski, a renowned proponent of the intelligent design movement, offered to Michael Shermer, founding publisher of *Skeptic* magazine, to be the resident evolution skeptic for the publication. Of course he declined. Most skeptics are selective skeptics. If we don't address this dichotomy, then much of our apologetics will fall on deaf ears. Apologists must not focus on peripheral issues but get to the heart of a worldview, knowing the Holy Spirit is the one who can truly change hearts.

Third, **many skeptics equate conservatism with fundamentalism.** Christians often have mistaken views about skeptics, but I was floored how many faulty views the skeptics had about Christians in general and me in particular. In fact, much of my energy was spent disassociating myself from the beliefs they considered “Christian,” such as the Word of Faith movement (they mentioned a few well-known prosperity preachers) the rejection of certain forms of medical treatment for prayer (Jehovah's Witnesses), and condemning homosexuals to death (some Muslim countries). They basically lumped all “religionists” together. But who can blame them? So many different voices have claimed to be “Christian,” that without genuine Christians providing clarity, they will inevitably mistake counterfeits for the real. Even though I stated my commitment to traditional marriage and opposition to embryonic stem cell research, they considered me liberal (and they meant it as a compliment). My wife and I chuckled because that is something I've never been called before! Be mindful that when you talk to a skeptic, it is possible he or she imports many fundamentalist views onto you that you may reject. And let's be sure not to do the same to them.

Fourth, **the church will get behind practical apologetic endeavors.** The week before the event, my pastor allowed me to ask members of the church to consider paying for a copy of my book (*Is God Just a Human Invention?*) that would be given as a gift to a skeptic. The response was amazing. My book table was flooded after the service as they gave me enough money to give away forty copies of the book for free. I gave a signed copy to each person who came that night and left the rest with the group for future events. They were deeply thankful and even clapped as I offered the books as a free gift from members of our church. The next day I got a few emails from skeptics who were already reading it. This experience confirmed an inkling I've had about the church for a long time: Christians love to support apologetic endeavors when they can see the practical ministry impact.

Fifth, **humor is a powerful tool for effective apologetics.** One of the high spots of the evening was when Bruce turned to me and said, “Wow, you actually have a sense

of humor. That's great!" He was surprised that I was willing to crack a few jokes (or at least *attempt* to do so) and to laugh at his. For whatever reason, he was under the impression that Christians are boring, condescending, and conceited. If we look at how Christians are often portrayed on TV and film (e.g., Angela on *The Office*) its no wonder people believe we have no sense of humor. In fact, many of us don't! Having a joyful spirit about life and not taking ourselves too seriously can go a long way in communicating the gospel effectively in today's culture. Some of the most effective apologists today (such as Lee Strobel and Craig Hazen) often disarm their critics with humor. Humor can be very endearing and unifying.

Sixth, **we can have confidence in the truth.** The week before my meeting with the "free thinkers" I sent out a tweet asking my friends for suggested questions to ask. The vast majority offered tough apologetic questions meant to stump the skeptics. There's certainly a place for tough questions, and I appreciated their suggestions, but why do we always feel the need to win a debate and disprove non-Christians? Isn't it more important to win the person? Given the depths of misunderstanding between Christians and skeptics, there is tremendous value in simply clarifying our different positions lovingly so people see the logical conclusions of their views. I was asked one of the atheists whether he believed the universe was eternal or came into existence from nothing. He chose the latter. I made sure the others understood that this is the price of atheism.^v Is this really the most rational position? To me, believing that something can come from nothing is the height of irrationality. Others may disagree, but at least they can be brought respectful to understand what their worldview entails.

There is a global resurgence of secularism in both Eastern and Western countries.^{vi} Atheists are actively spreading their worldview like never before. They organize conferences, fund bus advertising campaigns,^{vii} record podcasts, participate in debates, and write best-selling books to spread their "gospel." Christians must respond in turn, but we must also reach out personally to build relationships and engage in conversation. Now is not the time to retreat but to connect. Sure, some are hostile to Christianity. But many are not. If we each lovingly reach out to skeptical groups we might be amazed at how many are receptive to the gospel. I had a blast at the "free thinking" meeting and I hope I can be involved in many more. How about you?

Sean McDowell, Ph.D. is a professor of Christian Apologetics at Biola University, best-selling author, popular speaker, part-time high school teacher, and the Resident Scholar for Summit Ministries, California. Follow him on Twitter: @sean_mcdowell and his blog: seanmcdowell.org.

ⁱ According to David Kinnaman, this is true for most Americans, not just skeptics. In his book *UnChristian*, Kinnaman says that many outsiders to the Christian faith, and in particular young people, have a low view of Christians. Kinnaman says those

outside the faith hold six broad views of Christians: (1) hypocritical; (2) too focused on getting converts; (3) antihomosexual; (4) sheltered; (5) too political; (6) judgmental. See David Kinnaman, *UnChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks about Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2007), 29-30.

ⁱⁱ Sean McDowell and Jonathan Morrow, *Is God Just a Human Invention? And Seventeen Other Questions Raised by the New Atheists* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2010).

ⁱⁱⁱ The video of the evening can be viewed in its entirety at www.seanmcdowell.org.

^{iv} Gregory Koukl, *Tactics: A Game Plan for Discussing Your Christian Convictions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 38.

^v This is not the only price of atheism. In the movie *Expelled* outspoken atheist William Provine says that if Darwinian evolution is true there is no God, objective morality, meaning to life, life after death, and free will. Any atheist who says she actually believes this will eventually betray this conviction with the way she lives her life. The cost of atheism is embracing a worldview that is impossible to live.

^{vi} See Nancy Pearcey, *Saving Leonardo: A Call to Resist the Secular Assault on Mind, Morals, & Meaning* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Holman Publishers, 2010), 7-22.

^{vii} See <http://www.atheistbus.org.uk/>.