

Learning to Speak with Conviction When There is Room for Doubt

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Event Webpage: www.worldvieweyes.org/nacc15.html¹

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Workshop description: Nearly 40% of churched young people have had significant doubt, while nearly one-third have felt like rejecting their parents' faith (and many are doing so). How can we encourage honest questions and doubts, yet communicate the faith with conviction? This session will discuss a better mood to create, better methods to employ, and better material to present.

Room For Doubt: A grant-funded program that provides learning experiences and resources to strengthen the faith of committed Christians, address the questions of those who have doubts about their Christian heritage, and represent the Christian message to those who are skeptical about its claims.

Introduction

A. Christian Conviction

1. Truth (Eph 6:10–20; 1 Tim 2:4; 2 Tim 2:15–19).
2. Certainty, proof, confidence, and boldness (Acts 1:3; 2:36; 4:29; 17:31; Rom 1:16; Eph 3:11–12; Jude 3).
3. Reasonable.
 - a. A “reasoned defense” (1 Pet 3:15 - *Apologia* > apologetics).
 - b. Paul *reasoned* repeatedly with his audience (Acts 17:2–3,17; 18:4,19; 19:8–9; 24:12).
4. Don't doubt (Matt 14:30–32; Matt 21:21; James 1:6).

B. Developing Doubt in the Culture and the Church

1. Doubt and “churched youth.” (David Kinnaman and Aly Hawkins, *You Lost Me*)
 - a. Significantly doubted their faith? _____%.
 - b. Felt like rejecting their parents' faith? _____%.
 - c. Can't ask their most pressing life questions? _____%.
2. Church disengagement
 - a. Percent of churched youth “disengaged” by age 30? _____%.

“As we have examined other research, our conclusion is that 40 to 50 percent of kids who graduate from a church or youth group will fail to stick with their faith in college” (*Sticky Faith: Everyday Ideas to Build Lasting Faith in Your Kids* (Kindle Locations 96-97).

- b. The NONES—the Religiously Detached (See Pew Research surveys.)
 - (1) Adults: 1990 8.1%; 2007 15.3%; 2012 19.3%; 2014 _____%.
 - (2) 18-29 year olds: 2007 22%; 2012 32%.
 - (a) 2014: Older Millennials (25-33): _____%.
 - (b) 2014: Younger Millennials (18-24): _____%.
 - (3) From “religious homes”? _____%. (Data from the 2009 American Religious Identification Survey.)
 - (4) Religious “de-converts”? _____%.

¹ Check the event webpage for additional resources, including slides and outline with answers for blanks.

“The most frequently mentioned role of Christians in de-conversion was in amplifying existing doubt.’ De-converts reported ‘sharing their burgeoning doubts with a Christian friend or family member only to receive trite, unhelpful answers’” (Drew Dyck, “The Leavers: Young Doubters Exit the Church,” *Christianity Today* [Nov. 19, 2010]; citing a report at a 2008 meeting of the American Sociological Association). <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2010/november/27.40.html>.

c. 2007 vs. 2014: Pew Research, “2014 Religious Landscape Survey”

	2007	2014	Increase/Decrease
Religious Unaffiliated	36.6 m	56 m	19 million MORE
“Christian”	178.1 m (78%)	173 m (71%)	5 million LESS
Mainline Protestant	41.1 m	36.0 m	5 million LESS
Catholic	54 m	51 m	3 million LESS
Evangelical Protestant	59.8 m	62.2 m	2 million MORE

C. Factors for Developing Doubt

1. Prominent popular skeptics
 - a. Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (2006).
 - b. Christopher Hitchens, *How Religion Poisons Everything* (2007).
 - c. Bart Ehrman (Professor of Religious Studies, Univ. of North Carolina)
 - (1) *How Jesus Became God: The Exaltation of a Jewish Preacher from Galilee* (2014).
 - (2) *Forged Writing in the Name of God—Why the Bible’s Authors Are Not Who We Think They Are* (2011).
 - d. Lawrence Krause (atheist cosmologist, Arizona State): “Change is always one generation away. So if we can plant the seeds of doubt in our children, religion will go away in a generation, or at least largely go away. And that’s what I think we have an obligation to do” (*Salon* [Nov 4, 2014]).
2. Internet Accessibility

Larry Taunton, “Listening to Young Atheists: Lessons for a Stronger Christianity”: “When our participants were asked to cite key influences in their conversion to atheism – people, books, seminars, etc. – we expected to hear frequent references to the names of the ‘New Atheists.’ We did not. Not once. Instead, we heard vague references to videos they had watched on YouTube or website forums” (*The Atlantic* online [June 6, 2013]).

3. Greater number of “High-Information Seekers” (see Larry Barnett’s Next Generation Project at <http://www.projectnextgen.org/>).

“We found that the presence of doubt much more strongly predicted leaving Christianity for high information seekers [H]igh information seekers with doubts are about two to four times more likely to disconnect from Christianity than other doubters who are not high information seekers.... According to our research, high information seekers are not intrinsically more difficult to disciple, but only when they have unanswered questions or unresolved doubts about Christianity’s truth claims.”

D. Main Question: How can we achieve and maintain confident Christian conviction and an effective Christian witness in a climate of unprecedented religious skepticism and doubt?

I. CREATE A BETTER MOOD.

A. Highlight the **MOTIVE** for Christian faith.

1. More than the WHAT of faith (e.g. 1 Pet 3:14–16; Col 2:8; 2 Cor 10:5; 2 Tim 2:24–25; Titus 1:9; Jude 3).
2. The WHY of faith.

David Kinnaman, *You Lost Me*. Youth with a Christian Background:

23% say that it is “completely or mostly true” that they have significant intellectual doubts.

Christian Smith, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*: “Why did they fall away from the faith in which they were raised?... The most common answer [open-ended] for

becoming nonreligious (32%) was some version of intellectual skepticism or disbelief.... Answers included 'It didn't make any sense anymore.' 'Some stuff is too far-fetched for me to believe.' 'I think scientifically and there is no real proof.' 'Too many questions that can't be answered'" (p. 89).

B. Pursue a better OBJECTIVE.

1. Belief (Matt. 16:15-17; John 20:30-31; Rom. 10:9; 1 John 4:15; Heb. 11:6ab).
2. Trust (James 2:19; Matt. 4:1-3; Hebrews 11:1,6c).
3. Love (Mark 12:30; Deut 6:4-5; Cf. Matt 16:15-16 and John 21:1-17).

C. Show that you are SENSITIVE. (1 Pet 3:15; 2 Tim 2:24-25; Jude 22).

1. The Biblical HOW of Christian apologetics
 - a. 1 Pet 3:15 "with gentleness and reverence"
 - b. 2 Tim 2:24-25 "not quarrelsome but kind ... with gentleness"
 - c. Jude 22 "Have mercy on some, who are doubting"
2. Creating an "atmosphere" of humility (Col 3:12; Acts 20:19; Phil 2:2-3; 1 Pet 5:5)

Dallas Willard, *The Allure of Gentleness*: "We need to emphasize that point strongly, because the great problem facing the gospel of Jesus Christ is not the doubt that is outside the church; it is the doubt that is inside the church. We need to be able to deal with doubt lovingly, helpfully, and especially without ever scolding or shaming anyone for doubting. We must allow people to be who they are and then be able to meet them where they are" (25).

II. EMPLOY BETTER METHODS.

A. Be APPRECIATIVE of tough questions.

David Kinnaman: **Over 33%** of young adults say that "Christians are too confident they know all the answers" (*You Lost Me*, Kindle location 2119).

David Kinnaman: "I believe that *unexpressed* doubt is one of the most powerful destroyers of faith" (*You Lost Me*, Kindle location 3088).

1. Among key reasons for church rejection (see "Six Reasons Young Christians Leave Church," Barna Group (Sept 28, 2011)).
 - a. The church is overprotective.
 - b. The church experience of Christianity is shallow.
 - c. The church's ideas about sexuality are simplistic and judgmental.
 - d. The church's exclusive claims. (29% of young Christians say "churches are afraid of beliefs of other faiths.")
 - e. The church is unfriendly to those who doubt.
2. Biblical basis for legitimate doubt (> Room for Doubt: www.roomfordoubt.com)

B. Be COMPREHENSIVE in applying the Christian faith.

1. Daunting data in church rejection by Millennials (see Kinnaman, *You Lost Me*, Kindle 2121).
 - a. The church is "anti-intellectual" (18%).
 - b. The church is "antiscience" (25%).
 - c. The church is "not relevant" to their career or interests (24%)
2. Cf. Song: "The B I B L E, yes that's book for me."
3. The Bible's connection to the intellect, science, and one's career.

C. Be INTERROGATIVE.

1. Jesus and His questions. The Gospels record _____ questions by Jesus.
2. Learn some **penetrating questions**. (See section III for examples of key questions.)

D. Be COMPARATIVE.

1. How do the *alternatives* to the Christian worldview stack up?
2. Strategies of Christian apologetics
 - a. **Negative**: Respond to specific criticisms—to show that Christianity is NOT FALSE.
 - b. **Positive**: Try to show that the Christian worldview IS TRUE.

- c. **Neutralizing:** Expose the severe problems with the alternatives.

III. PRESENT BETTER MATERIALS.

A. **Important** but more peripheral matters.

1. Age of the universe.
2. Evolution *per se*.
3. Purported contradictions within scripture.

B. **The matter of MATTER.**

1. Limited possibilities
 - a. It's eternal.
 - b. It's self-generating. Did it generate itself? How can anything be a cause of itself?
 - c. It's just one of a possible *infinite* number of universes (multi-verse).
 - d. Generated by something or someone outside of space and time.
2. **Key questions:**
 - a. Is it eternal? What's the current scientific support for that?
 - b. Did it generate itself? How can anything be a cause of itself?
 - c. Are the "scientific" proposals for this really "scientific"?

3. **Candid comments**

E.g. **Stephen Hawking:** "Bodies such as stars or black holes cannot just appear out of nothing. But a whole universe can. . . . Because there is a law like gravity, the universe can and will create itself from nothing.... Spontaneous creation is the reason there is something rather than nothing, why the universe exists, why we exist. It is not necessary to invoke God to light the blue touch paper and set the universe going" (*The Grand Design*, 180).

E.g. **Alex Rosenberg:** "Why is there a universe at all? No reason at all. Why is there a multiverse in which universes pop into existence for no reason at all? No reason at all! It's just another quantum event. What science and scientism tell those who hanker for more is 'Get over it!'" (*The Atheist's Guide to Reality: Enjoying Life without Illusions* (pp. 38-39).

C. **The matter of LIVING matter** (life).

1. Key considerations
 - a. Conditions in the cosmos that make life possible.
 - b. Conditions on earth that make human life possible.
2. **Key questions**
 - a. What can explain the undeniable set of conditions in the universe that make life possible?
 - (1) Dozens of physical constants and their ratios.
 - (2) E.g. The strength of gravity.
 - (3) E.g. The number of electrons to protons.
 - b. How did life itself originate on earth?
 - (1) Did it come from elsewhere in the universe?
 - (2) Was it simply "luck" that the necessary chemicals and conditions were produced and assembled?
3. **Candid comments**
 - a. **Fred Hoyle** (agnostic/atheist):
 - (1) The pure chance of life starting on earth is about 1 in 10 to the 40,000th power.
 - (2) The number of atoms in the visible universe? 10 to the 80th power.
 - (3) "Panspermia": Life was "seeded" on earth from elsewhere.

Fred Hoyle: "Life could not have originated here on the Earth. Nor does it look as though biological evolution can be explained from within an earthbound theory of life. Genes from outside the Earth are needed to drive the evolutionary process. This much can be consolidated by strictly scientific means, by experiment, observation and calculation" (*The Intelligent Universe*, 242).

b. **George Whitesides**, Prof. of Chemistry, Harvard.

“Most chemists believe, as do I, that life emerged spontaneously from mixtures of molecules in the prebiotic Earth. How? I have no idea. . . . On the basis of all the chemistry that I know, it seems to me astonishingly improbable” (Chemical & Engineering News 85 [2007]: 12-17).

c. **Francis Crick**, co-discoverer of DNA molecule in 1953.

“An honest man, armed with all the knowledge available to us now, could only state that in some sense . . . [the origin of life] is ‘almost a miracle.’

Every time I write a paper on the origin of life, I swear I will never write another one, because there is too much speculation running after too few facts” (*Life Itself: Its Origin and Nature*, 88, 153).

D. The matter of MEANING.

1. Key questions

- a. What gives you meaning in life?
- b. What is the *basis* for meaning? Is it just whatever we want it to be?
- c. Is there any *ultimate* meaning to life? If not, have you really thought about what that means for you, or your family? If no ultimate meaning, why should we *care* about anything?

2. **Candid comment** by atheist **Alex Rosenberg**

“The love of stories comes to us in a package that also includes the illusion of free will, the fiction of an enduring self, and the myth of human purpose. A scientific worldview has to give up all of that.... So, individual human life is meaningless, without a purpose, and without ultimate moral value” (Rosenberg, *The Atheist's Guide to Reality: Enjoying Life without Illusions* (Kindle Edition, p. 19).

E. The matter of MORALITY: Key Questions

1. How do you decide what's right or wrong?
2. Is what is morally “right” or “wrong” totally determined by an individual? By a society? By a nation?
3. Are there any moral principles that should be true for everyone?
4. If morality is just relative to an individual, or a society, or a nation, why do people morally condemn the actions of *other* societies or nations? Why, for instance, would people so strongly condemn *racism*, or the systematic extermination of a people group, or *infanticide*, or *suicide jihadists*?
5. If *nothing* is morally right or wrong for *everybody*, are you willing to live with the implications of that?
6. If there *are* moral rights and wrongs *for everybody*, where did we get this sense of moral obligation that is greater than any individual or society?

F. The matter of MORTALITY

1. Impending death:
 - a. An unavoidable signal that the Spirit can use to direct us toward God.
 - b. But how are we using it, if at all, for *ourselves*?
 - c. How are we using it, if at all, for *others*?
2. Key Questions
 - a. Often used question: “If you were to die five minutes from now, would you go to heaven?”
 - b. “When you die, what do you think will happen?”
 - c. Referring to someone else's death: “What do you think they thought of death?” “One year ago, do you think they expected to die now?”
 - d. Does death prompt you think any more, or any differently, about life and how you live it? Why? How?

G. The matter of the MESSIAH

1. Key questions on the possibilities of Jesus as liar, lunatic, legend, or Lord.
2. The centrality of Christ (Messiah = God's anointed One).

Conclusion

- A. Room for doubt; yet a “better” way.
- B. Cf. Book of Hebrews. “It’s better.”

Resources on Cultural Context

- American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS). “American Nones: The Profile of the No Religion Population” (2008). See https://secularstudents.org/sites/secularstudents.org/files/NONES_08.pdf. Links to several studies at <http://commons.trincoll.edu/aris/>.
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Resources on Christian Worldview and Apologetics

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