

Gospel Conversations in a Postmodern Age

Lightbearers resource papers are designed as a resource to Lightbearers staff as they interact with students and partners and are asked to provide wisdom on a variety of topics. These papers should be considered an internal resource providing clarity on a sound evangelical stance on particular issues.

Foundational to each paper is the perspective that the Gospel is primary recognizing that the Gospel impacts every corner of life (1 Corinthians 6:20); therefore, we aim to provide staff with direction that is Biblically sound and points them to view any issue through the lens of the Gospel.

What drives this particular paper? This paper is intended to serve as a resource for having gospel conversations in a secular age. The cultural climate of North America has experienced a significant shift in the last 50 years. But within the church, evangelism methods have not changed as significantly. How should Lightbearers staff and the church shift in order to have more effective conversations with secular college students? In order to answer this question we must first understand, very broadly, the postmodern perspective. The second section looks at the struggle of sharing the gospel on American campuses and what shifts have been taking place in order to effectively evangelize. The last section of this paper provides some examples of deconstructing defeater beliefs as a part of the evangelism process.

Postmodern Perspective¹

Discipline	Author	Text	Reader
Literature	Writer, playwright, poet. The author is viewed as irrelevant to meaning or unaware of meaning of the text. The author doesn't stand over text as an authority.	Literary work. Texts are to be deconstructed, freed from logocentrism.	Audience, reader. The reader is the center of meaning. The focus of authority over the text shifts from the author to the reader.
History	Historian, chronicler. Authors write from a particular social perspective which serves to perpetuate their power.	Recorded data of a culture. Texts can be deconstructed. Critical analysis will identify aspects of authors "reification," etc.	Student of history. The reader stands over the text of history, identifying ways that it serves or challenges his cultural identity.
Art	Artists. Artists express their socially constructed outlook.	Painting, sculpture, theater, architecture. Any self-expression can be art.	Public, critic. Viewers identify ways the material expresses social reality.
Religion	Sage, disciple, priest, mystic. Religious figures either sanction the socialite, or rebel against it.	Sacred texts and rituals. These are "meta narratives" that explain the human condition.	Modern religious person. Readers seek to actualize themselves through religious forms.
Law	Framers of the Constitution; Legislature. These are representatives of the cultural elite.	Constitution; laws. These tools inflict the will of the powerful on the rest of society.	Contemporary legislation, litigation, and constitution interpretation. These are the means by which power can be redistributed.
Science	Scientist; scientific method. These constitute a "logocentric" expression of	Experimental data. This material is interpreted in accordance with existing social paradigm.	Scientists. Interpretation and application of data to technology to serve the accepted scientific paradigm.

¹ Dennis McCallum, *The Death of Truth: What's Wrong with Multiculturalism, the Rejection of Reason, and the New Postmodern Diversity* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Bethany House Publishers, 1996).

	the modernist worldview or "paradigm."		
Psychotherapy	Author is client. Patient's view of self as represented in personal narrative.	Client's story. Focus of therapy.	Psychologist and psychiatrist as interpreters. Viewing humans as social constructs.
Sociology	Human cultures and subcultures.	Social forms, mores and customs. Also worldviews and religions.	Sociologists and anthropologists. Identify interpretative communities and "reification processes."
Linguistics	Communication; Language users. Reality presents itself as linguistic symbols.	Human symbolic communication, including written texts.	Linguistic analysts and anthropologists. Analyze language games, interpretive communities, semiology (the study of signs and symbols)

Evangelism on Campus

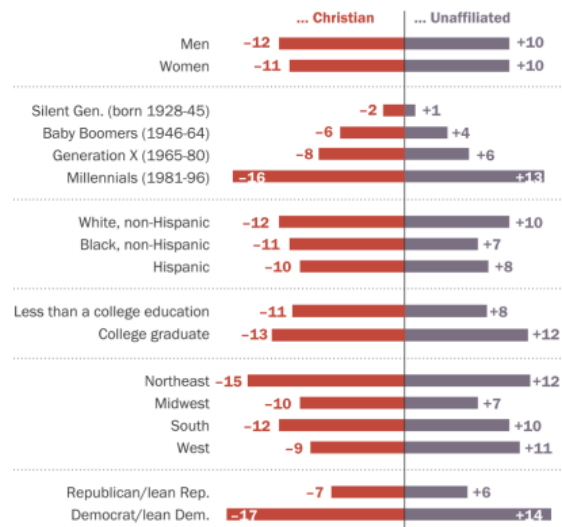
There is still a residue of a more conservative society in America. Most churches are growing with no effective evangelism effort. Despite the growth in megachurches, there is no evidence that the number of churchgoers in the United States is significantly increasing. What is growing is the number of secular people professing "no religious preference."³

In the past, there were a number of highly effective, short, memorable gospel presentations written for individual Christians to use in personal evangelism. These have all been extremely helpful in their own ways, but the churches and campus ministries that have used the same program in the same place for decades have seen steadily diminishing results. There are two primary reasons for this: (1) Fewer people are growing up in a Judeo-Christian worldview and the degree of biblical illiteracy is underestimated. (2) These people are filled with an entirely different worldview. They are not out of touch with their Judeo-Christian heritage and simply ready to hear clarifying arguments in order to believe. D. A. Carson frames their condition this way:

They are not empty hard drives waiting for us to download our Christian files onto them. Rather, they have inevitably developed an array of alternative worldviews. They are hard

Broad-based declines in share of Americans who say they are Christian

Percentage-point change between 2009 and 2018/2019 in the share who identify as ...



Source: Aggregated Pew Research Center political surveys conducted 2009 and January 2018-July 2019 on the telephone.
In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

³ "In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace," *Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project*, October 17, 2019, accessed June 8, 2022. <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2019/10/17/in-u-s-decline-of-christianity-continues-at-rapid-pace/>.

drives full of many other files that collectively constitute various non-Christian frames of reference.⁴

Evangelism in this cultural climate requires a reexamination of the Message, the Messenger, and the Conversations they are having.

The Message

Of first importance, the gospel must be taught fully, frequently, and lovingly. If the apostle Paul felt it necessary to remind the Corinthian church of the basics of the gospel, how much more do we need reminding in our day?⁵ The worldview of our day demands that evangelism starts further back than we typically suspect. In a time when there is so much ignorance about basic Christian worldview, we must get to the core of what we believe every time we speak. When later addressing defeater beliefs, the gospel will be the hub that relates to every topic we discuss. While a postmodern society largely ignores abstract arguments, there remains a hunger for beauty and justice. Not an abstract culture, but a culture of story and imagery. When having gospel conversations, you will always present propositions (God, sin, Christ, faith), but your own experience reveals so much more. It is a story (creation, fall, redemption, restoration) that you have lived in your own way. And it must be your favorite story to tell.

The Messenger

People today are incredibly sensitive to inconsistency and phoniness. People who balk at the idea of absolute truth will need to see greater holiness of life, practical applications of grace, gospel character, and virtue if they are going to believe. Thankfully, the scope of biblical application has no limits in your everyday life. The truth of the gospel message must be visible in the life of the messenger. People need to see the reality of your changed life. We must become a sign of the gospel ourselves.

The Conversations

Since there is very little Biblical foundation in place, Timothy Keller says that “evangelism in a postmodern context must be much more thorough, progressive, and process-oriented.”⁶ He goes on to outline the four stages that people have to go through to come from complete ignorance of the gospel and Christianity to full embrace:

1. intelligibility: explaining the nonnegotiable of the Christian faith in ways they understand
2. credibility: addressing defeater beliefs that contradict Christian faith
3. plausibility: entering into personal hopes, choices, and aspirations
4. intimacy:

⁴ Carson, D. A. *Telling the Truth: Evangelizing Postmoderns*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009.

⁵ 1 Corinthians 15:1-8.

⁶ Piper, John and Justin Taylor, eds., *The Supremacy of Christ in a Postmodern World* (Wheaton, Ill: Crossway Books, 2007), 114.

This kind of evangelism process reflects the shifts that college ministry leaders have already been seeing:⁷

- 1) **From prepared to unprepared teaching.** In a culture that values authenticity, written teaching can feel fake or coercive. Often truth is communicated more effectively in face-to-face, more conversational settings.
- 2) **From pastoral relationships to developmental.** Most students need more than spiritual shepherding, they need holistic discipleship—how to be a friend, time/money management, career mentorship with Christian professionals.
- 3) **From didactic teaching to dialogue in relationships.** The message of someone on a stage means less than someone who says “I’m with you in this...this is how I’m growing as well.” A learning posture rather than performance or perfection makes a bigger impact.
- 4) **From exegeting the scripture to exegeting the culture.** It takes a lot of work to understand someone’s perspective and motivations, but this is time well spent. Gone are the days of identifying large demographic groups on campus—individualism means diversity. Get to know the people and love the people in spite of their differences.
- 5) **From apologetics evangelism to hospitality evangelism.** Create a safe place for loving discussion, a place where students can see the gospel lived. This may mean that there are larger gatherings on Friday night in your home than Sunday mornings.
- 6) **From guilt-based gospel to shame-based gospel.** Fewer and fewer students feel a sense of guilt for not obeying moral standards. They didn’t grow up in a Christian worldview, and expressive individualism doesn’t make moral demands. What students do feel is loneliness, isolation, and inadequacy. They are not motivated by the idea that “I broke something” but “I am broken”—not “I did bad” but “I am bad.”⁸

Deconstructing Defeater Beliefs

Every worldview that opposes Christianity holds to an unstructured set of beliefs that automatically makes Christianity seem unintelligible or implausible. A “defeater belief” is a Belief-A that, if true, means Belief-B can’t be true. These are merely assertions not comprehensive arguments. These objections or problems with Christianity vary among different cultures. Even though belief is ultimately a saving work of God by grace and through faith, these obstructions to belief must be dealt with intellectually if someone is to come to faith. A person must come to the point where he or she says “that would be great if it were true.”⁹

It is critical to state these defeaters in the strongest possible way. If a non-Christian hears you express them and says, “that’s better than I could have put it” then they will

⁷ Scroggins, Krystopher and Andrew Youngblood (feat. Andrew McPeak). “EP100 - Leading the Post-Millennial Student.” Campus Ministry Leadership Podcast, July 2019, <https://open.spotify.com/episode/2UzyWhm5YY6suM7jk0Iglq?si=3c82b041fd28472e>.

⁸ For more resources on this see HonorShame.com and *The 3D Gospel* by Jayson Georges

⁹ Jesus and the Apostles model this for us in the New Testament. Jesus talks differently with Nicodemus in John 3 than he does with the Samaritan woman in John 4. Paul talks with Jews in the synagogue differently than “god-fearers” in the market, or pagan Greeks in Athens.

feel that they are being respected and will take your answer more seriously. You will need to have good answers to these defeaters delicately woven into normal conversations.

Our purpose with these defeaters is not to 'answer' them or 'refute' them but to deconstruct them. It is important to show that all doubts and objections to Christianity are really **alternate beliefs** and faith-acts about the world. And when you see your doubts are really beliefs, and when you require the same amount of evidence for them that you are asking of Christian beliefs, then it becomes evident many of them are very weak and largely adopted because of cultural pressure.¹⁰

- 1) **Other Religions.** There cannot just be one true religion. Look at all of the different beliefs throughout history. How could all but one of them be wrong? Most religions aren't all that different anyway. No one should insist their view of God is better than all the rest. Every religion is equally valid. Exclusivity of religion remains one of the primary threats to international peace. Maybe these people are finding meaning in their beliefs, but they shouldn't demand that everyone else believe the same thing. Your religion is just a product of your culture—if you were born in Indonesia you wouldn't be a Christian.

Response: "Every religion is equally valid" can only be true if there is no God or there is a God who is an impersonal force and who doesn't care what your doctrinal beliefs about him are. That is a very particular view of God, and you are basing your entire life on it, and you are asking me to change my view of God to your view of God. That is the very thing you just told me I am not allowed to do to you. That is absolutely inconsistent. What looks like inclusivism is basically a covert exclusivism. This idea that all religions are equally valid is itself a very white, western worldview based on the European enlightenment's idea of knowledge and values.

Do you think you have the truth? Which set of exclusive truth claims will lead to a humble, peaceful, non-superior attitude toward people with whom you deeply differ? At the center of the Christian truth claim is a man on a cross, dying for his enemies, praying for their forgiveness.¹¹

"If you were born in another country you wouldn't be a Christian." That's probably true. Are you telling me that therefore Christianity can't be true? If you were born in another country you wouldn't be a religious relativist. Does that mean what you are saying is true as well?

¹⁰ Tim Keller, "Deconstructing Defeater Beliefs: Leading the Secular to Christ," *The Movement*. October 2004.

¹¹ Piper, John and Justin Taylor, eds., *The Supremacy of Christ in a Postmodern World* (Wheaton, Ill: Crossway Books, 2007), 118.

- 2) **The Problem of Evil and Suffering.** How can the Christian view of an all-powerful, all-good, loving God be reconciled with the horrors that occur daily? Tragedy, abuse, and injustice everywhere. Either God is not in control or he doesn't care about us. You don't know the awful things that have happened to me and those close to me. There is no way that a loving God would let something like that happen.

Response: If you have a God great and transcendent enough to be mad at because he hasn't stopped evil and suffering in the world then you have to have at the very same moment a God who is great and transcendent enough to have good reasons for allowing it to continue. You can't have it both ways. Just because we can't discern a sufficient reason for an act of God, doesn't mean that there isn't one.

If you are talking to a suffering person the first response would be very cruel. A better response might be: Eastern religions say that suffering is an illusion, other western religions say that God is up there and he has his reasons but only Christianity has a God who has himself come into the world of suffering. If God himself has suffered then our suffering is not meaningless. If God himself has suffered then he must have reasons for allowing it to continue that aren't a matter of remoteness and distance. If God has himself experienced pain, tragedy, abuse, injustice, abandonment, loneliness, sadness, and grief, then, in the same way, God can be with you in all these things.

You just have to say that Christianity has better resources for believing that God is involved and cares about our suffering than any other worldview. In the secular worldview who cares about suffering? The strong eat the weak and it doesn't matter. If you are morally outraged by it, so what? If you go to every other religion the view of suffering is less poignant and immediate than the idea that God would come and get involved in this world's suffering. You should always talk about evil and suffering in terms of the Cross.

- 3) **The Sacredness of Choice.** If we all obeyed God's rules like the Ten Commandments just because God told us to then we're just mindless robots or zombies. You're not truly human unless you decide what's right and wrong. If I make choices based on moral pressure or fear of guilt that's manipulation. Surely God would want people to live authentically, isn't honesty important to him? Christians are not encouraged to make their own decisions, or to think about their beliefs for themselves. The Church is just using this to control people. The world is too diverse to live that way—too many cultures, personalities, and differences. I feel bad for people who conform to Christianity instead of just being themselves. Why does the church care about who I have sex with, what I wear, what I do to my body, etc.?

Response: Aren't there any people in the world who are doing things you believe are wrong that they should stop doing no matter what they believe inside about right and

wrong? Then you do believe that there is some kind of moral obligation that people should abide by and which stands in judgment over their internal choices and convictions. So what is wrong with Christians doing that? What you really want is freedom for yourself and no one else. That's not fair.

No one is really free anyway. We all have to live for something, and whatever our ultimate meaning in life is (whether approval, achievement, a loving relationship, our work) it is basically our "lord" and master. Everyone is ultimately in a spiritual straitjacket. Even the most independent people are dependent on their independence and so can't commit to anyone. What we need to realize is that we are not our own. Christianity gives you a lord and master who forgives you and dies for you.

We might not like the idea of absolutes, but the seemingly absolute nature of mathematics, physics, and genetics show us that life as we know it obeys certain constants. There is a real possibility that the designed consistency comes from a creator.

- 4) **The Record of Christians.** Isn't it true that some of the worst injustices, corruption, and even genocides are because of the church and Christians? Sure, every religion has hypocrites, but it seems like the most fervent Christians are the most condemning, exclusive, and intolerant. Christians have a history of supporting injustice, destroying culture, and oppressing people just because they think differently. There are so many people who are not Christian (or even religious at all) who appear much more kind, caring, and even moral than so many Christians. If Christians are saved by being good and moral then shouldn't all atheists be terrible degenerates?

Response: This is definitely one of the most warranted reasons for doubting the truth of a particular faith. But understand that the moral standards that they are using to judge hypocritical believers mainly come from Christianity itself. The worst thing they are saying about Christians is that they are not being Christian enough.

While it's true that Christians have committed terrible injustice, what about all the good they have done as well (ex. The abolition of slavery in the British Empire and William Wilberforce; faith-based organizations have been the cornerstone of child welfare system for 100 years¹²; the majority of US refugee placement and advocacy is facilitated

¹² Goodnow, Natalie. "The Role of Faith-Based Agencies in Child Welfare," The Heritage Foundation, accessed June 10, 2022, <https://www.heritage.org/civil-society/report/the-role-faith-based-agencies-child-welfare>.

by faith based organization¹³; 18.5% of the US hospital system is faith based/non-profit hospitals¹⁴).

The solution to injustices is not less but deeper Christianity. There have been terrible abuses within the Christian church. The prophets in the Old Testament and Jesus in the Gospels actually give us the strongest language to deal with such empty, abusive religion. Scholars have shown that even Marx and Nietzsche relied on the ideas of the biblical prophets for their critique of religion. Despite its abuses, Christianity provides perhaps greater tools than any other religion for its own critique.

When Martin Luther King, Jr. confronted terrible abuses by the white church he did not call them to loosen their Christian commitments. In his speeches and writings, he repeatedly uses the Bible to ground his arguments. He used the Bible's provision for church self-critique and called them to truer, firmer, deeper Christianity. He says that the solution for the bad record of Christians is not to get rid of Christianity but to be true to it, to be true to the gospel and to be true to what the Bible really teaches.

There are many people who are not religious who do good things. Religious people are not saved by God because of their goodness and morality. If that were the case then all atheists would be bad and immoral. Biblical teaching says that we are saved by undeserved grace, not by moral character.

- 5) **The Angry God.** Why does God want to send people to hell? The God of Christianity seems like some left-over idea from a more primitive religion especially with the animal sacrifices and stuff. How can the evil act of murdering Jesus be the one thing that makes God happy? I don't want someone to die for my choices—I would never ask God for that. If God wants to forgive me, why can't he just forgive me? I don't want any part of a God who needs blood in order to forgive me.

Response: On the cross God does not demand our blood but offers his own. All forgiveness of any deep wrong and injustice entails suffering on the forgiver's part. The forgiveness of real wrongs is always a form of suffering. If someone truly wrongs you, because of our deep sense of justice, we can't just shrug it off. We sense there's a 'debt.' We can then either a) make the perpetrator pay down the debt you feel (as you take it out of his hide in vengeance!) in which case evil spreads into us and hardens us b) or you can forgive – but that is enormously difficult. But that is the only way to stop the evil from hardening us as well.

¹³ Nawyn, Stephanie J. "Religion and Refugees Are Deeply Entwined in the US," *The Conversation*, last modified September 7, 2021, accessed June 10, 2022, <http://theconversation.com/religion-and-refugees-are-deeply-entwined-in-the-us-105923>.

¹⁴ Arnold, Paul. "What Percent Of Hospitals In The Us Are Non-Profit?," *Community Literacy Journal*, May 31, 2022, accessed June 10, 2022, <https://communityliteracy.org/what-percent-of-hospitals-in-the-us-are-non-profit/>.

If we can't forgive without suffering (because of our sense of justice) it's not surprising to learn that God couldn't forgive us without suffering — coming in the person of Christ and dying on the cross.

- 6) **The Unreliable Bible.** All Christians have a naive, uncritical trust in the Bible. There are some wise sayings, but it's a collection of socially regressive and often offensive stories. If we follow the Bible we will never get away from social oppression and racism. The Bible promotes holy war and genocide. The Bible encourages slavery, sexism, and homophobia. Christians don't even believe the Bible. They quote all these verses, but they don't follow all of them (Levitical laws). How can anyone take the Bible seriously in light of modern science, history, and culture. Myth and legend should not be encouraged as historic fact. It's full of errors and unreliable because it's a copy of a copy of a copy...

Response: The gospels' form precludes their being legends. The Biblical gospels are not legends but historically reliable accounts about Jesus' life. Why? 1) Their timing is far too early for them to be legends. The gospels, however, were written 30-60 years after Jesus' death – and Paul's letters, which support all the accounts, came just 20 years after the events. 2) Their content is far too counter-productive to be legends. The accounts of Jesus crying out that God had abandoned him, or the resurrection where all the witnesses were women — did not help Christianity in the eyes of first century readers. The only historically plausible reason that these incidents are recorded is that they happened.

The 'offensiveness' of the Bible is culturally relative. Texts you find difficult and offensive are 'common sense' to people in other cultures. And many of the things you find offensive because of your beliefs and convictions, many will seem silly to your grandchildren just as many of your grandparents' beliefs offend you. Therefore, to simply reject any Scripture is to assume your culture (and worse yet, your time in history) is superior to all others. It is narrow-minded in the extreme.

Q&A:

What is a “defeater belief?”

A belief that because I have Belief A and cannot receive Belief B. Once Defeater Belief A is addressed Belief B is now a possibility.

What's the difference between *guilt* and *shame*?

People feel shame when they violate community ideals and expectations, whereas guilt comes from transgressing laws and rules. Guilt says, “I did wrong, so I should confess and make restitution before I get punished.” Shame says, “I am wrong, so I should cover and hide before I get exposed.” The solution to shame and guilt are also quite different. Shame is removed by other people; the shamed must be restored by a higher person or reincorporated into the group. Guilt on the other hand is alleviated through acknowledgement or punishment. Once the perpetrator has made restitution, s/he is pardoned and declared innocent.¹⁵

¹⁵“FAQs,” *Honor Shame*, accessed June 8, 2022, <https://honorshame.com/faqs/>.

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