

Engaging the Skeptic in Conversation

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I live in the most unchurched city in North America. We have more skeptics, agnostics and atheists than anywhere else, at least on paper. A worthy mission field, right? I have the good news of the Gospel to share with hundreds of thousands of people in Vancouver—I just need to find *one* who will listen to me. So often I feel a bit like Tom Hank's character in *Cast Away*, Chuck Nolan who finds himself washed up on a deserted island in the Pacific. The island is crawling with coconuts—tiny vessels containing fresh water that could save his life and filled with their edible flesh. Chuck Nolan had piles and piles of these coconuts but couldn't get one of them open without spilling the water and ruining it. In a way engaging skeptics in conversation is a bit like trying to open one of those coconuts. They are tough nuts to crack. It's incredibly difficult to get people firmly in Satan's grasp to give ear to the Gospel. And even if you do, it's incredibly easy to botch the opportunity so that your chance is spoiled.

Last fall I found myself across a coffee shop table from a young woman named Caroline. I had met her at gathering of navel-gazing, agnostic existentialists. And she was willing to talk with me because I had made an observation that spiritually intrigued her. She had never been to church in her life. She had surrounded herself with people who disbelieve in God's existence—but she wasn't convinced. She found herself attracted to the idea that there has to be something going on that she didn't know—specifically ideas from a BBC program on gnostic secrets. And she had lots of questions that no one had ever answered. Over the course of two three-hour conversations I had the chance to tell her the clear story of the Gospel. I listened as carefully as I could. I was passionate for Christ. I shared Christian love and excitement for her to find the truth. A man in the coffee shop even came up to us mid-conversation and said to her, "You listen to him. What he said to you was awesome. He's telling you the way to heaven." I prayed to the Holy Spirit for her, "Lord, I can see you working. Keep working in her heart." I was filled with hope coming home from that meeting. Never heard from her again. She hasn't responded to any texts or emails. Was it the message? Was it me? Did I weird her out?

I wish I could be writing this paper sharing with you the secret to cracking open these tough nuts—the magic formula to winning these lost, skeptical souls to Christ and keeping them in conversation. Of course I cannot. This is the work of the Holy Spirit, who works where and when he wills by the power of his Gospel. This paper is not about the effectiveness of the Gospel when it is preached. Romans 1:16 stands as our foundation—the Gospel is the δύναμις ("dynamite" literally the "power") of God at work where it is preached. This paper is about finding the platform, opportunities to find others like Caroline. How do we better engage skeptics in conversation? We'll consider the topic in three "mind-blowing" points:

1. Engage.
2. Skeptics.
3. In Conversation.

The points might seem obvious, but even if we are passionate about them, there are plenty of places we can improve to do this better. I will share a bit of my ministry context and anecdotes of serving in Vancouver, British Columbia. As a good Canadian I apologize in advance if the stories seem about me. I hope you can see them merely as examples of another pastor wrestling with the question at hand. I ask you to contextualize my experiences and research with your own ministry. Because by walking through the struggle together to answer the question "How can we better engage skeptics in conversation?" I believe we can do just that.

Engage

I enjoy apologetics. I enjoy wrestling with answers to questions that skeptics have. And I really enjoy the opportunity to actually converse with skeptics and even debate them on philosophical and spiritual points. But even if you too have boned up on *what* to say, the hurdle we face is getting an audience in the first place. There is quite a difference between carrying on chit chat with other parents from your kids' soccer team to discussing the meaning of life and their views of mortality.

James Emery White's book *The Rise of the Nones* offers a fascinating analysis of why so many have disengaged from any spiritual conversation with organized religion. His book confirms what we already know by intuition: people, especially young people, are privatizing their faith lives.

“Privatization is the process by which a chasm is created between the public and private spheres of life, and spiritual things are increasingly placed in the private arena. So when it comes to things like business, politics, or even marriage and the home, the personal faith is bracketed off. The process of privatization, left unchecked, makes the Christian faith a matter of personal preference, trivialized to the realm of taste or opinion.”¹

It is not that people no longer have spiritual questions or think about spiritual topics. The big questions of life, “Where did all this come from?” “What is the purpose of life?” “What happens to me when I die?”—these are still questions that keep people up at night. But postmodernism and relativism have left them distrustful of *authority*, especially the authority perceived in organized religion. White does not really explore the alternative. Where do people who have spiritual questions, but don't trust the Bible, the Christian church or any organized religion turn to? With what do people fill the spiritual void? Who do they talk to?

Every Thursday night I attend a community group of mostly atheists, agnostics and the spiritually lost to discuss some sort of philosophical topic. The topics vary widely but it's easy to see for these people this group is where they feel some sort of spiritual outlet, of contemplating those big questions, and feeling supported by the others who agree with them in their lostness (for lack of a better word). One feature that persistently drives me a little crazy is what James Emery White points out (himself borrowing a term from Stephen Colbert,) as *wikiality*: “reality determined by majority vote,” or as Colbert quipped, “Together we can create a reality we can all agree on. The reality we just agreed on.”² This idea comes from the idea that truth can be democratized since anyone can make changes to Wikipedia, better known as *the definitive source of truth*. In other words, why consult the Bible when I can read Wikipedia? Why believe in an objective source of morality from God when I can create my own morality with which 51% of others agree? We can create our own truth.

What this means is that our job as pastors and Christians in the 21st Century has become harder—not only in the content of our conversations, but in the task of getting any conversation started at all. People feel that a 5 minute internet search makes them as much an expert on medical questions as their doctor. And surely you have experienced the frustration of debating a point of fact regarding the Bible after years of study with someone who looked it up on Wikipedia for 5 minutes! It simply illustrates that to the “Nones” our expertise is not needed. In fact our expertise should even be held in suspicion, because we are judged to have the ulterior motives of seeking power or to extract their tithes.

Fortunately, Wikipedia does not mean you will be out of job, nor do blogs supposedly debunking the Bible

¹ White, James Emery. *The Rise of the Nones: Understanding and Reaching the Religiously Unaffiliated*. (Grand Rapids, Michigan:

² White, 59.

mean that the Christian church is going to fold any time soon. People's need to talk about spiritual things has in no way diminished. I believe there is a deep dissatisfaction with what people can find online or in distracting themselves. It is simply because God has put the God-sized hole, called eternity, inside of us that will leave people always searching and dissatisfied until they find him. Or put better in the book of Ecclesiastes, "He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the human heart; yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end." (Ecc 3:11). This same concept has been put beautifully by Augustine in his *Confessions*: "You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in you."³

All people have this God-sized hole that they are seeking to fill with idols, distractions and a vain search for the truth. And even our technology and social media cannot fill this hole. Two relatively recent studies in Vancouver confirm this idea. My city is multi-cultural, filled with newcomers and people from every walk of life and representatives of a wide variety of worldviews. In spite of this a recent local poll pointed to loneliness and social isolation as the number one social issue people face today.⁴ This was especially true of young people ages 25-34 and immigrant populations. What should this tell us? People have plenty of superficial, surface relationships, but very few people they trust enough to engage with on a deeper, spiritual level. The "Nones", skeptics, immigrants, even hardened atheists are looking for spiritual answers, or at least some sort of distraction to avoid having to deal with their deep, unanswered questions. It needs to be our goal to engage them better. But how do we do that?

It certainly does not regularly happen just sitting in our offices at church. But it also no longer happens purely in structured social settings. Today many people bear their souls online in ways they never would in person. You only need to look at the comment section after a Christian blog post to see that skeptics and atheists are searching. They are contemplating, digesting, judging and accepting or rejecting what they find. Often they are simply looking for others in some sort of community to affirm their beliefs, just as we do. Perhaps people do not call their search spiritual; they use other terms like, "community", or "having a conversation" but their essence is spiritual. These are places to discuss the issues that matter—the forum for engaging.

A divorced woman named Sheila is on such a journey. She was abused by her father, married a man just like him, and suffers also from a degenerative disc disease that leaves her unable to hold a job. Her daughter is the only person in her life, and their relationship is up and down. You can imagine Sheila, who was raised in Indonesia as a Hindu might have questions. Her health is in decline and her yoga class just is not offering her the satisfaction she is looking for. I met her for coffee after she felt we had a connection. And before we had even begun saying hello, she simply said, "I want to talk about faith today." She was thirsting for a spiritual conversation. And she needed someone to talk to.

So how do we engage in these kinds of conversations? Perhaps one way is by deliberately looking to meet people like Sheila. Where do people in your community go to engage in conversation? Or meet others of a like mind? In Vancouver one tool to find these people is a website called Meetup.com. If you search Meetup.com you can find groups of almost any stripe and interest of people who are thirsting for community, for deeper connections. The philosophy group I am part of had 110 members when I joined a year ago, but has swelled to over 750 with zero effort on our part. People come and go, but for me it has been a steady source of meeting people like Sheila, on a spiritual journey looking to engage in conversation. Another pastor I knew started a community group and even found funding from the city for a "newcomers club". He deliberately made his group secular so it would not chase off skeptics who smelled an ulterior motive. He got his club promoted in welcome packets to people moving into the city. Volunteering for

³ Augustine, *Confessions* (1:1)

⁴ Craig Takeuchi, "Vancouver study: A city of loneliness or unfriendliness?" 19 June 2012: <http://ow.ly/XkWNw>

community cause groups is another ideal place to meet these kinds of people, especially if the cause is one that non-religious people might support. For example, I spoke to another local pastor who was volunteering to work with the homeless population. He noted to me that the other volunteers who weren't Christians often would want to talk with him about deeper spiritual issues when they were confronted with the stark consequences of sin and vice. They engaged with him on spiritual issues.

As a pastor it is incredibly easy for me to allow my time to be consumed by Sunday preparations, teaching Bible classes, meeting with members and a few prospects. It takes a lot more effort to build a relationship with a skeptic. I have to deliberately make the effort and carve time out of my schedule and family life to go hang out with people I may have little in common with apart from a love to share Christ. In the past I made the mistake of building relationships in the community based on my passion for running. But guess what we always talked about? I did share my faith with these people and invited them to church. But those opportunities were fewer and took more patience and work to get to share Christ because they saw our relationship was about something else, namely running.

The Apostle Paul serves as a good model for engaging skeptics. He sought them out. His *m.o.* was to start in the synagogues where he knew people were gathered for a religious conversation. In Philippi we hear how Paul and Silas went down to the river, "where we expected to find a place of prayer". In Athens we hear how Paul spent time in the marketplace, looking to meet people and ran into a group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers. No doubt Paul saw an opportunity for a spiritual conversation in their own philosophical debates to share ideas they had never heard before. It seems like someone invited him to speak in a more formal setting, namely the Areopagus in Acts 17. Paul's mission was to engage these unbelievers where they were at, quite literally.

Paul was willing to talk in front of large crowds like in Acts 17, or one on one such as to the jailer in Philippi. Once we find the marketplace of ideas, the Areopagus of our modern communities, the other key component in engaging is building relationships. That could be on someone's doorstep. Or in a community group. Or perhaps most often today with a cup of coffee in hand at a local Starbucks.

It is extremely rare (I can think of three instances) where my philosophy group allowed me the floor to share clear Christian perspectives, a presentation of law and gospel. I am almost always the only Christian, and often the only practicing religious person in the room. But I regularly share Christian viewpoints and ask questions that these people on spiritual journeys have either never thought of, or want to follow up with me. And so we end up at a coffee shop one on one, or in small groups. And every time I have had the chance to share Christ.

One particularly effective strategy I have tried a couple of times is simply to engage a person I sense to be asking spiritual questions is to ask them if I can hear more of their story. I dropped a young lady named Hasnaa off at her car one evening and when she complained that people at our group only wanted to debate, no one wanted to get to know each other, I jumped at the opportunity. I suggested that we should meet twice—once where she could tell me her story, once where I got to tell mine. A third person ended up joining us, but the endeavor helped us develop a genuine friendship. More than that, she considers Farhan and I to be two of her closest friends in the city. And I regularly get to invite her to church and share the gospel. Is she a believer? Sadly, she is too much of an agnostic still, but she continues to hold the door open.

For reflection:

As you contemplate your own context perhaps reflect on this question, "Where is the Areopagus in your community?" What could you do to engage more skeptics in conversation of any sort? Where in your community do people turn for answers? Your answers to those questions will help you with our first and perhaps most critical point—engaging. Without this first effort, all the apologetics and clear preaching won't get us very far.

Skeptics

What actually is a skeptic? Someone who doubts Christianity? A person who considers themselves to be “spiritual but not religious”? An unchurched person who is on a spiritual journey but harbors doubt or resentment to organized religion? Millennials who ask questions? And if you find them, how do you engage them with so many potential objections and spiritual hurdles to clear?

To these questions you will find a smorgasbord of Christian books on evangelism. One of the better ones, *Meet the Skeptic*, by Bill Foster, is an easy, how-to book that offers simple apologetic answers for lay people to address these questions.⁵ Bill Foster divides people up into four categories: spiritual skeptics, moral skeptics, scientific skeptics and biblical skeptics. His book helps you to categorize people you meet and offers simple questions that help address the objections that these skeptics have. Spiritual skeptics are people trapped in living a salvation by works attitude. They are characterized by dismissing all religions the same. They will dismiss Christianity because to them, it’s just another way up the mountain they don’t feel a need to climb. Moral skeptics are relativists who use absolutes to dictate their relativism and dismiss Christianity. Naturally, scientific skeptics use science as a reason to dismiss Christianity, even though much of what they assert are blind faith principles. Finally he addresses biblical skeptics—people who dismiss Christianity because they will not seriously consider the evidence supporting the Bible’s claims.

Meet the Skeptic is appealing because it helps us easily categorize people and remember easy questions we can ask that address their spiritual problems. The best part of his book is that he helps his target audience get to the “root questions” that they should be asking in conversation. However, the weakness of his approach is readily apparent to anyone who, like me, has attempted to pigeon hole someone else as quickly as possible, in an attempt to figure out *what to say*. I meet someone and ask the usual questions: “Where are you from?” “How long have you been in the city?” “What do you do?” But my real intent often is to diagnose their spiritual background: “Do you have a church home?” “What is your church background?” Perhaps it used to be that if someone replied, “Baptist” or “Hindu” you could safely assume they hold a particular set of beliefs. But this is not the case anymore. People feel free to hold eclectic, often cognitively dissonant viewpoints and religious beliefs.

People are nuanced and more complex than labels can offer. And many resent being labeled—“To label me is to negate me,” in the familiar words of Kierkegaard. Just in the past two months people I’ve interacted and witnessed to bear this out: a member of a Baptist church who actually attends regularly at a Jehovah’s Witnesses church; an agnostic scientist who wants to contemplate Hinduism before considering Christianity; a Muslim woman who doesn’t believe God exists; a man on a spiritual journey who believes he has tried every religion and accepts parts of them all; an author of a book about reincarnation espousing Buddhist teaching who claims he is not a Buddhist. Each of these people could probably fit under several of Bill Foster’s four categories of skeptics.

If we want to engage skeptics, we first have to listen.

A lot.

It’s not always fun to do. After listening for hours of hearing people spout off philosophies, and tired, well-tread, dismissive arguments there are times I want to pull out my hair. Or plenty of times when I realize I have been duped into listening to someone who just wanted to talk at me, instead of actually having a conversation. But the more you do this, the better you become at asking the right questions (hint: this is

⁵ Bill Foster, *Meet the Skeptic*. (Green Forest, AR: Master Books, 2008).

what *Meet the Skeptic* tries to teach). And it's through careful questioning that people start to express their worldview and presuppositions that allow us to accurately diagnose their skepticism and know where to begin. That place is often not where we think, at first.

Skeptics, like the woman at Jacob's well, are not always rejecting Christianity or dismissing its claims for intellectual reasons, but because of sin. Just as the woman at Jacob's well deflected Jesus when he prophetically pointed out her sin of idolatry, skeptics questions often are not addressing their true spiritual concerns. Dismissive questions help them avoid what their consciences naggingly remind them is the real problem.

I poured myself into reaching an existentialist atheist named Nawar, who has lived a remarkable story. He is an ethnically Kurdish man from Iraq, the son of a middle class atheist in a Muslim country. His family was on vacation in Europe when Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait in 1989. They pled for asylum and stayed in France. Nawar ended up in Canada and eventually Vancouver where he became an energy resource commodities broker. A multi-millionaire. He was convinced wealth could give him freedom and freedom would allow him peace. But today he is disillusioned. He writes books like *Dystopia: The Four Stages of Hell*—dark novels of people in spiritual anguish. He remains an advocate for doctor assisted suicide *for healthy people*. I made one of my strongest efforts to befriend and get to know him. I even got him to take home *The Reason for God*. He never read beyond chapter one. He shut me down, and said he had no time for me. Why, I wondered? It hit me when his wife stopped coming to his existentialist meetings. His entire focus was trying to convince himself that it is morally acceptable (since there are no real morals) to have an open marriage when his wife will not accept that. Engaging Nawar in further philosophical or spiritual conversation almost becomes a moot point unless he can recognize his own vain idols.

Listening to people and asking to hear their stories helps us to reframe the individual we are reaching out to from a label to person—a soul for whom Christ died. As a home missionary with the pressure of filling out my monthly report for my mission board I am keenly aware of the statistical boxes I have to fill out—"Initial Contacts, Law/Gospel Presentations, Follow Up Visits" made and the like. Those little boxes hold me accountable. Labeling people puts them into those boxes and I immediately lose the passion that Christ had for saving these lost souls so I can check a box. They were not means to something greater for Jesus, but ends in themselves. He died for them. I want to reach them and that requires patient listening. It requires building a relationship.

Engaging these skeptics means engaging lost souls and reaching out to them in love. Perhaps one of the best ways to get to the next step of "in conversation" is to ask sincere questions as one Christian writer puts it, "When you ask a question, you are displaying interest in the person asked. ...Most people are not queried on many, if any, subjects. Their opinions are not solicited. To ask them is to be remembered fondly as a very interesting and gracious person in your own right."⁶

The hope is simple—I want to engage this person in conversation in the hopes that through me they might come one step closer to Christ.

For reflection:

As you contemplate your own context perhaps reflect on this question, "How do I love these lost souls so that I treat them as souls for whom Christ died, instead of labels, especially when I don't know them?" Where do you struggle with this most in your own ministry setting? Loving these souls may open the door to your loving goal to reach them with the Gospel in conversation.

⁶ Hugh Hewitt, *In, But Not Of: A Guide to Christian Ambition* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2003), 172-173. Quoted by Donald Johnson, *How to Talk to a Skeptic*, (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 2013), 47.

In Conversation

Skeptics certainly do have genuine doubts. And many alternate belief systems. And many beliefs that they have never tested or scrutinized. And quite often prejudices or misconceptions of Christianity. C.S. Lewis points out that many atheists and skeptics reject Christianity because they have a view of Christianity that deserves to be rejected, “Very little of the opposition we meet is inspired by malice or suspicion. It is based on genuine doubt, and often on doubt that is reasonable in the state of the doubter’s knowledge.”⁷ As long as they believe they have an accurate perception of Christianity, trying to engage them in a conversation that pushes Christianity is incredibly difficult. Nawar thought of Christians as foolish, superstitious, and close-minded intellectual weaklings. He surprised himself and me, by telling me the day we met. “I’ve never met a Christian before I could even talk to. You are far more open minded than any one I’ve ever met.” It opened the door to opportunities to share the Gospel.

Had Nawar asked me more direct questions of my beliefs, I doubt he would have complimented me for being “open minded” of his progressive views. But I was an anomaly to him—breaking his caricature of Christianity. I cannot say our conversations were long enough for my satisfaction, or that he truly listened to me. But I challenged and changed his perception of Christianity. This raises the question for us, what is the goal of engaging skeptics in conversation?

As a seminary student I felt winning the argument was enough. If I can argue this person into realizing how foolish their views are, surely they will listen to the Gospel! As a greener pastor I softened to being satisfied if I could communicate what I felt was clear law and gospel. “Do you know where you will be if you die tonight? What will you say if God asks, ‘Why should I let you into *my* heaven?’” Coming to Vancouver I have changed my target completely. Atheists are not about to allow me to simply jump into “God’s Great Exchange” without first debating endlessly the existence of God or the origin of the universe.

Perhaps our goal should not be the content of the conversation, but simply that we leave things so there can be another conversation.

This is perhaps the hardest part of adopting a model of building relationships—it requires trust that a follow up will happen eventually. Of course I want to share clear law and gospel every time. But if my goal is simply to help this individual move one small step closer to an *understanding* of the Christian message, I can be content. *Understanding* is the operative word. I cannot argue, debate, or convince people of Christianity. This is the Holy Spirit’s work. But if the message is communicated clearly enough so they can understand, then the Holy Spirit is present working through his law and gospel.

There is another element to this. *Tolerance* is today’s cultural virtue. While society often wants that word to mean “permissiveness” or “acceptance”, *understanding* is a better definition. It means expressing an interest and concern for ideas that are foreign to us. Suggesting the goal of our conversation should be understanding gives you complete permission to share who you are as a Christian and what you believe so that the other person may understand you, even if they don’t accept it. Likewise it allows us to ask questions, even deep questions of our conversation partner because we genuinely want to understand their views. I appreciate the way Timothy Keller suggests this in his introduction to *The Reason for God*:

I urge skeptics to wrestle with the unexamined “blind faith” on which skepticism is based, and to see how hard it is to justify those beliefs to those who do not share them. I also urge believers to wrestle with their personal and culture’s objections to the faith. At the end of

⁷ C.S. Lewis, *God in the Dock* (London: Fount Paperbacks, 1979), 67. Quoted by Johnson, 49.

each process, even if you remain the skeptic or believer you have been, you will hold your own position with both greater clarity and greater humility. Then there will be an *understanding* [emphasis added], sympathy, and respect for the other side that did not exist before. Believers and nonbelievers will rise to the level of disagreement rather than simply denouncing one another. This happens when each side has learned to represent the other's arguments in its strongest and most positive form. Only then is it safe and fair to disagree with it. That achieves civility in a pluralistic society, which is no small thing.⁸

As orthodox, Bible-believing Lutherans, we can completely agree with an approach to conversation like Keller suggests. We do not have to accept one thing the skeptic says. Yet with a stated goal of understanding one another we can listen to their worldview all day long. Most importantly, we earn the right to share our Christian hope.

Seeking understanding also diffuses the perception that you are attacking another person's beliefs and worldview when we ask tough questions. And we need to ask them. To have an effective conversation we need to get to the foundation of their beliefs, their worldview. I mean the so-called *big questions*, "What is the meaning of life?" "What happens when you die?" "Is there such a thing as absolute truth?" More than that, we want to gauge their perception of the Christian worldview. This is particularly true of people who abandoned Christianity to embrace skepticism. If you don't find out first what the Christianity they abandoned really is, you may eventually find yourself defending a god or a Christianity you don't believe in yourself. So even if they are eager to hear your views, understanding your conversation partner certainly must be your first goal.

And then, when you finally get the chance to talk—the floor is yours, then what? If you're like me this is when you get that dry-mouth sensation and your mind is racing to think *what do I say?* What tone do I take? Do I bust out a napkin and start drawing "God's Great Exchange"? Or thoroughly debunk their views? Should I tell a Bible story? Can I phone Mark Paustian and put him on speakerphone to regurgitate one of his beautiful vignettes from *Prepared to Answer*?

I will say this: The feelings of inadequacy always spring up worst when God has most clearly opened the door for me to share my faith.

If you have felt that way, you are not alone. Maybe these thoughts have even been paralyzing enough that you avoid our first two steps altogether—**engaging, skeptics**—that this third most vital step does not come to fruition when God clearly gave you a chance. Again you are not alone. We are clay pots through and through. Feeling inadequate is part of being human. In fact, it is appropriate to feel humbly inadequate because of the awesome task God is giving you to be his messenger. I always have appreciated the self-depreciation of other evangelist pastors who in spite of 30 years of experience and hundreds of cold calls still tell you, "I still get nervous, ringing that doorbell."

When you do open your mouth, however, it's important to remember—you are not Timothy Keller, or Mark Paustian, or our illustrious keynote speakers. You are you. And remembering the doctrines of vocation and spiritual gifts is a wonderful blessing to adopt the right apologetic or evangelistic approach needed at that moment. Perhaps most importantly we remember the promise of our Savior, "But when they arrest you, do not worry about what to say or how to say it. At that time you will be given what to say, for it will not be you speaking, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you." (Matthew 10:19,20).

Armed with this promise of God and the book *Evangelism for the Rest of Us: Sharing Christ within Your*

⁸ Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2008), xix.

Personality Style, you have all you need. Really, you don't even need to read this little book about evangelism by Mike Bechtle. The title pretty much says it. Use your personality style. The various apologetic and evangelistic approaches that are out there do not work unless they fit you. Bechtle's book is of great comfort to those of us who are introverts, or lack confidence, or have less than perfect personalities. He does not directly say it, but he is appealing to the doctrines of spiritual gifts and vocation to equip people with the right sorts of questions and approaches that work for them.

It goes beyond the scope of this essay to really evaluate and explore the various apologetic and Gospel sharing models that are out there in any sort of helpful way. However, to briefly point out that there is quite a variety to choose from you can examine:

1. **Negative apologetics** – The sort of apologetics that seeks to debunk or disprove the false beliefs of skeptics. This model is good and necessary for those who are unwilling to listen to any religious ideas.
2. **Positive apologetics** – The sort of apologetics that seeks to build a case for Christianity. *Mere Christianity* by C.S. Lewis or the second half of *The Reason for God* contain good examples.
3. **Law/Gospel presentation models** – Our classic example is “God's Great Exchange” but there are lots of other models available.
4. **Storytelling** – Given our culture's affinity to narrative, a story telling approach is one of the most effective way to listen to hold people's attention. Christine Dillon wrote a book called, *Telling the Gospel through Story* that teaches a model for doing this. *Prepared to Answer* and *More Prepared to Answer* by Mark Paustian are also fantastic models of this method that mix in apologetic arguments.
5. **Personal testimony** – For many millennial skeptics this method is really valuable so they can see you are “authentic” in your own beliefs of Christianity.

Pick one. Better yet, work on a couple and use one or a combination of methods that is best for the person you are engaged in conversation with. Ultimately, if your goal is to love the person you have gotten to know, indicated your desire to understand him or her and be understood and found an opportunity to talk deeply with about spiritual things, this will probably not be your only chance to share the gospel. And even if they do not suddenly have a full conversion experience, God will still plant the seed you have sown to glorify his name and Lord-willing bring that person one step closer to his Son.

Maybe you walk away from the conversation feeling unsatisfied, or wondering how you could have answered questions better. Maybe you get a bunch of homework to research some obscure or off-the-wall question your skeptical friend has. Maybe you go home and bone up on some apologetic arguments you realize you could have used. Maybe you simply learn from your mistakes and are better equipped for the next conversation. But the seed is still planted, and if you have **engaged the skeptic in conversation** he or she will hopefully want to do it again.

I met a young man from India who was pursuing a life passion in physics. He is a classic skeptic. Self-proclaimed agnostic. Razor sharp scientist. He's completed a master's degree and worked on several projects with particle colliders in Switzerland and Manitoba. He asks tough questions. And he is not afraid to get into very heavy apologetic/faith-based discussions. We've met three times one on one to talk for hours on end about these topics. I've invited him to social events at church and my home. I've intrigued him to read the Gospel of John—he says he wants to but every time we meet; he has yet to begin. I've pulled out all my cards on him—negative apologetics, debunking his cognitively dissonant ideas; positive apologetics, arguing for the existence of God, the miracle of Scripture, clear law and gospel presentations, the story of the Bible from Adam to Christ, and my own impassioned pleas. The seed is planted, no question. The Holy Spirit has worked in his heart. But so far I can't report any sort of spiritual

breakthrough. I'll keep talking to him, meeting him for coffee and praying for the seed to sprout faith in his heart. But here's where the conversation ends and God's work begins.

For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile. (Romans 1:16)

For reflection:

*As you contemplate your own context perhaps reflect on these questions, "Where do your spiritual gifts help you excel in sharing the Gospel?" and "Considering the apologetics approaches you have learned, what models do you feel you want to explore and learn more deeply?" What other reading or self-equipping can you do to feel more comfortable to **engage skeptics in conversation?***

Soli Deo Gloria!