

DECONSTRUCTING DEFEATER BELIEFS:

Leading the Secular to Christ

By Tim Keller, Senior Pastor, Redeemer Presbyterian Church

A. THE IMPLAUSIBILITY STRUCTURE OF A CULTURE

1. Defeater beliefs

Every culture hostile to Christianity holds to a set of 'common-sense' consensus beliefs that automatically make Christianity seem implausible to people. These are what philosophers call "defeater beliefs". A defeater belief is Belief-A that, if true, means Belief-B *can't* be true.

Christianity is disbelieved in one culture for totally opposite reasons it is disbelieved in another. So for example, in the West (as we will explore below) it is widely assumed that Christianity can't be true because of the cultural belief there can't be just one "true" religion. But in the Middle East, people have absolutely no problem with the idea that there is just one true religion. That doesn't seem implausible at all. Rather there it is widely assumed that Christianity can't be true because of the cultural belief that American culture, based on Christianity, is unjust and corrupt. (Skeptics ought to realize, then, that the objections they have to the Christian faith are culturally relative!) So each culture has its own set of *culturally-based doubt-generators* which people call 'objections' or 'problems' with Christianity.

When a culture develops a combination of many, widely held defeater beliefs it becomes a cultural 'implausibility-structure.' In these societies, most people don't feel they have to give Christianity a good hearing – they don't feel that kind of energy is warranted. They know it just can't be true. That is what makes evangelism in hostile cultures so much more difficult and complex than it was under 'Christendom.' In our Western culture (and in places like Japan, India, and Muslim countries) the reigning implausibility-structure against Christianity is very strong. Christianity simply looks ludicrous. In places like Africa, Latin America, and China, however, the implausibility structures are eroding fast. The widely held assumptions in the culture make Christianity look credible there.

2. Dealing with the implausibility structure today

Many books on reaching post-moderns today give the impression that people now need virtually no arguments at all. The 'apologetic' is a loving community, or the embodiment of social concern. I couldn't agree more that post-modern people come to Christ through process, through relationships, through mini-decisions, through 'trying Christianity on'. They are pragmatic rather than abstract in their reasoning, etc. But the books that are against any arguments at all seem to miss the fact that the extreme pragmatism of non-Christians today *is* part of a non-Christian world-view. Our post-enlightenment culture believes what has been called *expressive individualism*. That is – *it is true if it works for me.* This obviously is based on the view that truth and right-or-wrong is something I discover within my own self and consciousness.

What then of the claim that "post-modern people don't want arguments – they just want to see if it works for them"? All right – as with any form of contextualization, let us as evangelists enter – adapt partially – to the culture of expressive individualism. Let us show them the reality of changed lives. Let us use narratives rather than long strings of logic. But at *some* point you must also challenge the sovereignty of individual consciousness. Jesus is Lord, not my personal consciousness. At some point, the idea that *"it is true if and only if it works for me"* must be challenged. We have to say: "Ultimately that is correct – in the very, very long run, obeying the truth will 'work' and bring you to glory and disobeying the truth will 'not work' and bring you to ruin. But in the short run (like – even throughout all the rest of your life!) obeying the truth might lead to ostracism, persecution, or other suffering.

There have been many times in New York City that I have seen people make professions of faith that seemed quite heart-felt, but when faced with serious consequences if they maintained their identification with Christ (e.g. missing the opportunity for a new sexual partner or some major professional setback) they bailed on their Christian commitment. The probable reason was that they had not undergone deeper 'world-view change'. They had fitted Christ to their individualistic world-view rather than fitting their world-view to Christ. They professed faith simply because Christianity *worked* for them, and not because they grasped it as true whether it is 'working' for them this year or not! They had not experienced a 'power-encounter' between the gospel and their individualistic world-view. I think apologetics *does* need to be 'post-modern.' It does need to adapt to post-modern sensibilities. But it must challenge those sensibilities too. There do need to be 'arguments.' Christianity must be perceived to be true, even though less rationalistic cultures will not demand watertight proofs like the older high-modern western society did.

B. A 'SANDWICH' APPROACH TO SHARING THE GOSPEL

1. Two parts to sharing the gospel

What this means now is that there are two parts to sharing the gospel in a particular culture – a more 'negative' and a more positive aspect.

a) The more negative aspect has to do with 'apologetics' – it consists in **deconstructing the culture's implausibility structure**. In short, this means you have to show on the culture's own terms (that is, by its own definitions of justice, rationality, meaning) that its objections to Christianity don't hold up.

b) The more positive aspect of sharing the gospel is to **connect the story of Jesus to the base-line cultural narratives**. In short, you have to show in line with the culture's own (best) aspirations, hopes, and convictions that its own cultural story won't be resolved or have 'a happy ending' outside of Christ.

2. A sandwich of three layers

But I think the overall best way to 'present the gospel' is a kind of 'sandwich' approach to these two parts. The following assumes there is a process and a series of conversations between you and the person who doesn't believe.

a) **Brief gospel summary.** First, the gospel must be presented briefly but so vividly and attractively (and so hooked into the culture's base-line cultural narratives) that the listener is virtually compelled to say "*It would be wonderful if that were true, but it can't be!*" Until he or she comes to that position, you can't work on the implausibility structure! The listener must have motivation to hear you out. That is what defeaters do – they make people super-impatient with any case for Christianity. Unless they find a presentation of Christ surprisingly attractive and compelling (and stereotype breaking) their eyes will simply glaze over when you try to talk to them.

b) **Dismantle plausibility structure.** Alvin Plantinga wisely asserts that people avoid Christianity not because they have really examined its teachings and found them wanting, but because their culture gives huge plausibility (by the media, through art, through the expertise and impressive credentials of its spokespersons) to believe a series of defeater beliefs that they *know* are true, and since they are true, Christianity can't be. The leading defeaters must be dealt with clearly and quickly but convincingly. Defeaters are dealt with when the person feels you have presented the objection to Christianity in a clearer and stronger way than they could have done it.

c) **Longer explanation of the person and work of Christ.** Now, if people find you have at least undermined the defeaters in a listener's mind, you can now return to talking at greater length about creation, fall, redemption, and restoration. If you try to do apologetics before you pull off a quick, attractive presentation of Christ, people's eyes will glaze over and they will become bored. But if you try to do a very lengthy explanation of the meaning of Christ's cross and resurrection before you convincingly deal with the defeaters, they won't listen to you either.

Summary of the approach:

1. **The attractive gospel** – Brief gospel connected to baseline narratives
2. **Why Christianity can be true** - Dismantling doubts and defeaters
3. **The Biblical story of the gospel** – A more thorough telling

C. THE PROCESS

1. The gospel connected to baseline cultural narratives

The doctrines of creation, sin, grace, and faith must be presented in connection with 'baseline cultural narratives' – Jesus must be the answer to the questions the culture is asking. Don't forget – *every* gospel presentation presents Jesus as the answer to *some* set of human-cultural questions, like 'how can I be forgiven?' (Western moral individualism) or 'how can I be free?' (post-modern expressive individualism) or 'how can we overcome evil forces in the world?' (contemporary Africans) etc. Every gospel presentation has to be culturally incarnated, it must assume *some* over-riding cultural concern, so we may as well be engaged with the ones that we face! Christianity must be presented as answers to the main questions and aspirations of our culture. Two of the over-riding concerns are:

a) **Cultural concerns.** First a concern for *personal freedom and identity*. Contemporary people ask: Who am I? I'm not completely sure – but I do know I have to be free to create my own identity and sense of self. Whatever spirituality I have, it must leave me free to experiment and seek and not be a 'one size fits all.'

Second, a concern for *unity in diversity*. Contemporary people ask: How can we get past exclusion and exclusivism? How can we live at peace in a pluralistic world? How can we share power rather than using power to dominate one another? How can we embrace the 'Other' – the person of a sharply different viewpoint and culture?

b) **Gospel resources.** *Gospel resources for personal freedom*. Kierkegaard's depicts sin in *The Sickness unto Death* – as 'building your identity on anything but God' which leads to internal slavery and narrowness of spirit. This is a gospel presentation that connects well today. (Kierkegaard, like Nietzsche and other great thinkers, was a good century 'ahead of his time.') Kierkegaard also deconstructed mere religion and moralism and contrasted them with the gospel. (See his Three ways of life: the aesthetic, the ethical, and the spiritual.) Building your identity on any finite created thing besides God leads to the idolization of that factor and the demonization of anyone who lacks it.

Gospel resources for living at peace. If you build your identity mainly on your class, or race, or culture, or performance you will necessarily vilify and disdain anyone who lacks what you consider the cornerstone of your own

significance. Therefore, building your identity on God leads to hatred of the other, to social conflict and oppression. Jonathan Edwards (again, a man ahead of his time) recognized that if your highest love and greatest is your nation, your family, your career, even your religious performance, then you will disdain other nations, families, classes of people, and other religions. If anything but God is our "highest good" (i.e. if we make anything an idol) then we have to demonize or at least exclude some part of creation. But if God is our ultimate good, then we are free to develop deep love for (what Edwards calls) "*Being in general.*" If we truly made the Lord our ultimate beauty and Savior and good – we would have an equal love and joy equally in all creation, all individuals, all people groups, even in all nature and created things.

In any case, there is no religion with a more powerful ground-motif for accepting enemies and the 'Other' than Christianity. We are the only faith that has at its heart a man dying for his enemies, forgiving them rather than destroying them. This must be presented to our culture as an unparalleled resource for living in peace in a pluralistic society.

Summary

As we said above, people's eyes will 'glaze over' if you start your presentation with 'reasons Christianity is true'. Christianity must be attractive to people before they will sit still for a presentation of intellectual credibility. A person must come to the point where he or she says, "that would be great if it were true – but is it?" Then and only then will they sit still for a discussion on why Christianity is true. So Christianity has to first be presented attractively and compellingly. We must show post-modern western culture – with its aspirations for personal freedom and unity in diversity – that its 'Story' can only have a 'happy ending' in Jesus Christ. Then we can deal with the main objections (the 'defeaters') in our culture that make it hard to believe that Christianity is true.

Here is an example of a brief gospel presentation:

Why we are here. The one God is a community – a Trinity of three persons who each perfectly know and defer to one another and love one another and therefore have infinite joy and glory and peace. God made a good, beautiful world filled with beings who share in this life of joy and peace by knowing, serving, and loving God and one another.

What went wrong. Instead, we chose to center our lives on ourselves and on the pursuit of things rather than on God and others. This has led to the disintegration of creation and the loss of peace – within ourselves, between ourselves, and in nature itself. War, hunger, poverty, injustice, racism, bitterness, meaninglessness, despair, sickness, and death all are symptoms.

What puts the world right. But though God lost us he determined to win us back. He entered history in the person of Jesus in order to deal with all the causes and results of our broken relationship with him. By his sacrificial life and death he both exemplifies the life we must live and rescues us from the life we have lived. By his resurrection he proved who he was and showed us the future — new bodies and a completely renewed and restored new heavens and new earth in which the world is restored to full joy, justice, peace, and glory.

How we can be part of putting the world right. Between his first coming to win us and his last coming to restore us we live by faith in him. When we believe and rely on Jesus' work and record (rather than ours) for our relationship to God, his healing kingdom power comes upon us and begins to work through us. Christ gives us a radically new identity, freeing us from both self-righteousness and self-condemnation. This liberates us to accept people we once excluded, and to break the bondage of things (even good things) that once drove us. He puts us into a new community of people which gives a partial, but real, foretaste of the healing of the world that God will accomplish when Jesus returns

2. Deconstructing the implausibility structure

What are the dominant defeaters in contemporary Western civilization? These are the dominant defeaters discovered in a recent survey I did of young under 25 year olds in NYC who are not Christian. Below six 'defeaters' are stated and answered in a nutshell. Why Christianity *can't* be true – because of:

a) The other religions. Christians seem to greatly over-play the differences between their faith and all the other ones. Though millions of people in other religions say they have encountered God, have built marvelous civilizations and cultures, and have had their lives and characters changed by their experience of faith, Christians insist that only they go to heaven — that their religion is the only one that is 'right' and true. The exclusivity of this is breath taking. It also appears to many to be a threat to international peace.

Brief response: Inclusivism is really covert exclusivism. It is common to hear people say: "No one should insist their view of God better than all the rest. Every religion is equally valid." But what you just said could only be true if: First, there is no God at all, or second, God is an impersonal force that doesn't care what your doctrinal beliefs about him are. So as you speak you are assuming (by faith!) a very particular view of God and you are pushing it as better than the rest! That is at best inconsistent and at worst hypocritical, since you are doing the very thing you are forbidding. To say "all religions are equally valid" is itself a very white, Western view based in the European enlightenment's idea of knowledge and values. Why should that view be privileged over anyone else's?

b) Evil and suffering. Christianity teaches the existence of an all-powerful, all-good and loving God. But how can that belief be reconciled with the horrors that occur daily? If there is a God, he must be either all-powerful but not good enough to want an end to evil and suffering, or he's all-good but not powerful enough to bring an end to evil and suffering. Either way the God of the Bible couldn't exist. For many people, this is not only an intellectual conundrum but also an intensely personal problem. Their own personal lives are marred by tragedy, abuse, and injustice.

Brief response: If God himself has suffered our suffering isn't senseless. First, 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 (at the same moment) have a God great and transcendent enough to have good reasons for allowing it to continue that you can't know. (You can't have it both ways.) Second, though we don't know the reasons why he allows it to continue, he can't be indifferent or un-caring, because the Christian God (unlike the gods of all the other religions) takes our misery and suffering so seriously that he is willing to get involved with it himself. On the cross, Jesus suffered with us.

c) The ethical straitjacket. In Christianity the Bible and the church dictate everything that a Christian must believe, feel, and do. Christians are not encouraged to make their own moral decisions, or to think out their beliefs or patterns of life for themselves. In a fiercely pluralistic society there are too many options, too many cultures, too many personality differences for this approach. We *must* be free to choose for ourselves how to live — this is the only truly authentic life. We should only feel guilty if we are not being true to ourselves — to our own chosen beliefs and practices and values and vision for life.

Brief response: Individual creation of truth removes the right to moral outrage. 1) 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? 2) 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 love 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. Christianity gives you a lord and master who forgives and dies for you.

d) The record of Christians. Every religion will have its hypocrites of course. But it seems that the *most* fervent Christians are the most condemning, exclusive, and intolerant. The church has a history of supporting injustices, of destroying culture, of oppression. And there are so many people who are not Christian (or not religious at all) who appear to be much more kind, caring, and indeed moral than so many Christians. If Christianity is *the* true religion — then why can this be? Why would so much oppression have been carried out over the centuries in the name of Christ and with the support of the church?

Brief response: The solution to injustices is not less but deeper Christianity. 1) There *have* been terrible abuses. 2) But in the prophets and the gospels we are given tools for a devastating critique of moralistic religion. Scholars have shown that Marx and Nietzsche's critique of religion relied on the ideas of the prophets. So despite its abuses, Christianity provides perhaps greater tools than the other religions do for its own critique. 3) When Martin Luther King, Jr. confronted terrible abuses by the white church he did not call them to loosen their Christian commitments. He used the Bible's provision for church self-critique and called them to truer, firmer, deeper Christianity.

e) The angry God. Christianity seems to be built around the concept of a condemning, judgmental deity. For example, there's the cross — the teaching that the murder of one man (Jesus) leads to the forgiveness of others. But why can't God just forgive us? The God of Christianity seems a left-over from primitive religions where peevish gods demanded blood in order to assuage their wrath.

Brief response: On the cross God does not demand our blood but offers his own. 1) All forgiveness of any deep wrong and injustice entails suffering on the forgiver's part. 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. 2) 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.

f) The unreliable Bible. It seems impossible any longer to take the Bible as completely authoritative in the light of modern science, history, and culture. Also we can't be sure what in the Bible's accounts of events is legendary and what really happened. Finally, much of the Bible's social teaching (for example, about women) is socially regressive. So how can we trust it scientifically, historically, and socially?

Brief 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.

Two final notes on dealing with 'doubts' and 'defeaters.'

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 feel that they are being respected and will take your answer more seriously. You will need to have good answers to these defeaters woven in redundantly to everything you say and teach in the church.

Our purpose with these defeaters or doubts is not to 'answer' them or 'refute' them but to *deconstruct* them. That is, to "show that they are not as solid or as natural as they first appear" (Kevin Vanhoozer). It is important to show that all doubts and objections to Christianity are really *alternate* beliefs and faith-acts about the world. (If you say, "I just can't believe that there is only one true religion" — that is a faith-act. You can't prove that.) 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.

3. Steps into faith

What about the positive? If you are ready to move toward the exploration of faith in Christianity, you must be —

a) Deconstructing doubt. Your doubts are really beliefs, and you can't avoid betting your life and destiny on *some* kind of belief in God and the universe. Non-commitment is impossible. Faith-acts are inevitable.

b) Knowing there's God. You actually already believe in God at the deep level, whatever you tell yourself intellectually. Our outrage against injustice despite how natural it is (in a world based on natural selection) shows that we already do believe in God at the most basic level, but are suppressing that knowledge for our convenience. The Christian view of God means world is not the product of violence or random disorder (as in both the ancient and modern accounts of creation) but was created by a Triune God to be a place of peace and community. So at the root of all reality is not power and individual self-assertion (as in the pagan and post-modern view of things) but love and sacrificial service for the common good.

c) Recognizing your biggest problem. You aren't spiritually free. No one is. Everyone is spiritually enthralled to something. 'Sin' is not simply breaking rules but is building your identity on things other than God, which leads internally to emptiness, craving, and spiritual slavery and externally to exclusion, conflict, and social injustice.

d) Discerning the difference between religion and the gospel. There is a radical difference between religion — in which we believe our morality secures for us a place of favor in God and in the world — and gospel Christianity — in which our standing with God is strictly a gift of grace. These two different core understandings produce very different communities and character. The former produces both superiority and inferiority complexes, self-righteousness, religiously warranted strife, wars, and violence. The latter creates a mixture of both humility and enormous inner confidence, a respect for 'the Other', and a new freedom to defer our needs for the common good.

e) Understanding the Cross. All forgiveness entails suffering and that the only way for God to forgive us and restore justice in the world without destroying us was to come into history and give himself and suffer and die on the Cross in the person of Jesus Christ. Both the results of the Cross (freedom from shame and guilt; awareness of our significance and value) and the pattern of the Cross (power through service, wealth through giving, joy through suffering) radically changes the way we relate to God, ourselves, and the world.

f) Embracing the resurrection. Because there is no historically possible alternative explanation of the rise of the Christian church than the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ. And if Jesus was raised from the dead as a forerunner of the renewal of all the material and physical world, then this gives Christians both incentive to work to restore creation (fighting poverty, hunger, and injustice) as well as infinite hope that our labors will not be in vain. And finally, it eliminates the fear of death.

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>> Evangelism

“Evangelism” can be a frightening word. If you are someone who is unfamiliar with, or has real issues with Christianity, the idea of someone “evangelizing” you, may be offensive. If you are a Christian, thinking about telling others about Christ may be very intimidating.

But evangelism is important. It is basically letting people in on the fact that Jesus offers life, hope and grace to those who sense their need for it. Evangelism is central to what God calls the church to do.

Red Mountain’s philosophy for reaching Birmingham, and helping people see the glory of the gospel, is largely based on Tim Keller’s paper Evangelism Through Networking and Fred Harrell’s paper The Gospel and the City. Naturally, we will have to reflect on how to best implement their principles in our place, but the central commitments will be the same.

Think about a few key ideas as you read the papers:

- > Evangelism should be based more on loving relationships than on programs. We want to grow organically, rather than programmatically.
- > Evangelism is something we do together (it is “corporate”), as well as something we do personally. We want to create an atmosphere at every event (in the DNA of Red Mountain) that allows people to “process” the gospel, and where Christians with different types of gifts can serve others.
- > We expect that people will want or require multiple exposures to the gospel and to our church before they are ready to make decisions about the faith. We will work hard to create ways for people to “process”.

Every person involved with Red Mountain should either be a “seeker” (exploring Christianity), or a “bringer” (helping people become a part of our family, and/or helping people wrestle with the gospel).



>> **Evangelism through “Networking”...**

Tim Keller; July 1992

Philosophy of Networking

“Networking” was originally a modern marketplace-jargon word, which refers to deliberate relationship building to meet business goals. I use it to mean a whole philosophy of ministry based on friendship evangelism.

For years, Christians have talked about “friendship evangelism” as opposed to methods such as “cold contact” evangelism (street evangelism, tract distribution, cold calling), “mass evangelism” (crusades, radio/TV broadcasts), “visitation evangelism” (Evangelism Explosion). Friendship evangelism was always considered 1) informal, something that could not be effected much through leadership or programs, and 2) something that mainly only mature Christians did much. (Why? Because it took both courage and the ability to articulate the gospel and field questions.) Therefore, friendship evangelism was only ever seen, as a supplement to the REAL evangelism “programs”. Those programs were evangelistic services, or visitation evangelism courses, or broadcasts, and so on.

Why was friendship evangelism not seen as the REAL evangelism programs? 1) Pastors could not program friendship evangelism, and thus felt powerless to effect it. 2) Friendship evangelism seemed elitist--something only for advanced Christians.

No research can prove this-but the more modern, the more secular, the more urbanized, and the newer the cities and communities, the more these traditional programs do not seem to bear fruit. Why? Most programs rely on the reception of the gospel from a stranger. Either the crusade evangelist, or the trained “visitor”, or some other stranger must give the gospel to the non-believer. As our modern society becomes more privatized, as neighborhoods disappear and people “cocoon”, the likelihood that people will listen to a stranger diminishes. Radio and TV evangelism does fit in better with modern culture, but the follow-up gap is severe. (How do you get the spiritually awakened through TV into a church? The problem with a privatized culture-it creates people who are commitment-resistant. Radio and TV can do very little to turn the “decisions” into disciples.)

In response, many churches are discovering that the entire church can be based on a philosophy of networking. It is a complete retooling of the entire church’s ministry, giving every part an “outward” face, making virtually every ministry activity a - friendship evangelism event. This means everything -worship, small group life, education, etc. This is to create a “corporate culture.” It can be supported by planning and ministry programs; it can be done by even (and by ESPECIALLY) the new believer. (In fact, the new believer is critical; see below!) A networking philosophy consists of the following parts or principles.

SUM:

In an increasingly privatized, secularized society, we will find more and more that:

1. People will not listen to the gospel from strangers: a) not to strangers who come to their door, b) not to strangers who call them, mail them, or even advertise to them.
2. People will not be assimilated well through strangers who follow them up by coming to their doors either. Assimilation takes enormous energy if we assume that most visitors come without a good relationship to anyone in the church.

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3. People will have to come a number of times to a program or service before even giving us their name in order to send them material/ newsletter, and so on.

By the early 21st century we may see that the main way churches did evangelism in the latter 20th century was: 1930's-1960's - Crusade Evangelism; 1960's-1990's - Visitation Evangelism; 1990's-present- Network Evangelism.

Principles of Networking

A networking church is developed primarily through cultivating a mindset, a collective attitude and only secondarily through setting up programs.

1. The key to networking: a partnership between newer/ "grapevined" believers and -mature believers. THE problem in evangelism is this: New believers have the connections and credibility with non-believers, but do not have the power to articulate. On the other hand, mature believers have the power to articulate but not the place in the worldly "grapevines". Example: To take an enemy occupied town, we need both , artillery, to smash a hole in the gate or walls, and infantry, to actually walk in and take the town. The worship /preaching is like the artillery, the relationships of members to their friends are the infantry. Without artillery, the new Christian may not even speak about his faith.

2. The critical event in networking: the internal "self-talk" that turns "comers" into "bringers". The critical event in a networking church is when a Christian (and especially a new Christian) comes to a worship service, a small group, or some other church ministry program and says to him or herself: "I have been actively talking to my non-Christian friends about Christ, and this is exactly what I have been trying to show and say to them all along, but this does it far better than I can do it." OR "I have been silent in my witness, but this will give me credibility as a Christian to my non-Christian friends, and therefore I now begin to feel the courage to reach out to them." A Christian becomes a "bringer" when two things happen: a) The internal thinking mentioned above occurs in response to the service, and b) the Christian brings a non-Christian or non-churched person who wants to come back! That experience confirms the "bringer" behavior and turns it into a habit. A bringer will use the church as a plausibility structure to reach out to his or her web-network.

In a networking church, you must be either a seeker, a bringer, or a cell leader (follow-up) OR YOU ARE DEADWEIGHT!

3. The cultivation of this "mindset" of networking.

There must be an atmosphere of expectation that every member will always have 2-4 people in the "incubator", a force field in which people that are being prayed for, given literature, brought to church or other events. How is this mindset cultivated?

a). Brainstorm with the potential bringers the needs of their non-believing friends and colleagues. Make a list of their most basic needs, interests, hopes, fears, idols, aspirations, frustrations, dilemmas, prejudices, sins, strengths. (Make a list under each of these headings! Reflect in a disciplined way.)

b). Preach and present in every service and ministry so that both Christians and non-Christians are always intentionally challenged and addressed. Then be certain that the great truths of the faith are always brought into connection with the unbeliever's heart, that the gospel is used to answer the questions they are asking. If you don't know how to do it, get books, tapes, etc. of those who are.

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Evangelistic preaching is a “dynamic”:

- i.)* First, you must preach as if skeptics, agnostics, etc. are there, and if you do, they will soon be there—they will be brought. This may mean at first you must do a lot of reading and listening through the media to the issues non-Christians struggle with.
 - ii.)* As a result, you will be talking to more non-Christians, listening to their objections, areas of confusion, and so on. The evangelistic appointments will then,
 - iii.)* have a shaping influence on your preaching, making it more evangelistically effective. You must always preach, thinking about the kinds of non-Christians you have spoken to as you study your texts and prepare your sermons. If you are talking to non-Christians constantly, the answers you give them will sink in and appear in your preaching. Only if you are talking constantly to non-Christians will your preaching address them and only if you address them will people bring them and only if they are brought will you meet them. And so on!
- c).** Modeling by the leadership. Your officers and leaders should all have an “incubator”. They should be constantly talking about their incubators in non-condescending terms. It should be evident to all that they are regular “bringers”, always working on and praying for people in their web networks. It may even be important to screen officer candidates for the presence of the “networking mindset”.
- d).** Kingdom-centered prayer. Your prayer meetings must be first of all oriented toward your “incubators”, seeking to push the boundaries of the kingdom outward over your community. See C. John Miller’s *Outgrowing the Ingrown Church*, chapter 7, on the difference between frontline prayer and maintenance prayer meetings.
- e).** Tools for networking evangelism should be everywhere -- handout pamphlets, books, tapes. A serious networking church would develop its own tracts and tools designed specifically for the kinds of needs and questions its “incubator” people have. If the tools are not being taken and using get others!
- f).** A constant variety of visitor-seeking events such as “Friendship Sundays”. But if the networking philosophy sinks in, Friendship Sundays become obsolete.
- g).** Continually evaluate all programs ruthlessly: are they BOTH challenging Christians AND non-Christians? Are both kinds of people regularly present? Are they both being kept interested?

4. The modes of networking, There are four basic kinds of “web networks”: familial, geographical (neighborhood), vocational (career/school associates), relational (friends not necessarily in the other networks). In urban areas, the latter two are more important; in rural areas the first two are more important. It depends! And different Networking-evangelism events can be oriented to one or the other. Example: Geographically based evening small groups are better for winning familial and geographical networks. But workday breakfast and lunch events in business districts are better for the latter two networks. Etc.

5. The process of networking Networking is a commitment to “process evangelism”. Most of the other programs of evangelism are “crisis” oriented, usually bringing the person to a decision very quickly -- through the signing of cards or through the praying of a sinner’s prayer. Research shows that a) the more varied ways a person hears the gospel, and b) the more often a person hears the gospel before making a commitment, the better the comprehension, the less likely of “reversion” to the world. Many people simply have “process personalities” -- they will never come to faith if they are pushed. They need to come in stages.

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In a networking philosophy:

a). It is expected that the non-Christian will be exposed to the gospel at least several times on the way to commitment. There is real opportunity afforded regularly for seekers to “cross the line into faith” and make a commitment, but there is never great pressure put on the will to “decide NOW”.

b). There are lots of opportunities for the seeker to list his/her questions and concerns, and for those issues to be addressed honestly. Question and answer times, appointments over lunch, reading sequences, etc. can afford this. Case Studies of

Networking “Pathways”

A networking church will discern, create, and keep track of “pathways” for the non-churched into the congregation. Redeemer Presbyterian Church in Manhattan (my church) affords a sample of such pathways.

1. Business-network events pathway. “BOLD”-inter-church preaching points at lunch time in the heart of the two basic business districts. Preaching is done for exactly 30 minutes (12:45-1:15 pm) in public cathedrals. Though they are churches, the space is “secular” space, used for concerts and cultural events, and is seen as public as a museum or art gallery. The mid-town meeting draws 250-300; the downtown meeting approximately 100.

“Harvard Club” is a twice a month evangelistic breakfast in a major business networking center. Christian men sponsor a non-Christian or unchurched friend. The meetings draw 50-60 each.

Many people come to Christ through this path: a) tapes from Redeemer (lowest commitment), b) then a visit to BOLD or the Harvard Club (modest commitment), c) then a visit to Redeemer for worship (higher commitment).

2. Worship service pathway. Worship is presented in varied styles, once a day with a question-answer forum, contextualized somewhat to professional culture. Preaching is designed to build up and challenge both believers and skeptics. The preaching is key to encouraging friendship evangelism, for it models it (the Christian hears the preacher talking to the worldly mind) and supports it. The worship is thus the “artillery” for evangelism and the Christian is the “infantry”. The worship pathway works like this.

a). Christian friend brings to church, and “follows up” through conversation. We even propose restaurants in the vicinity to use for follow-up.

b). Seekers returning to church are urged/drawn into 3 “fishing pools”:

i.) Foundations Class (Focused on basics of the faith; taught by staff for inquirers)

ii.) Membership Class (Focused on basics of Redeemer; taught by staff)

iii.) Visitor dessert. (The least formal; a question and answer session led by the senior pastor)

At each of these, cell leaders are to be present to recruit virtually all who come into a cell group. These events give staff and small group leaders the opportunity to draw into either cell groups or one-on-one evangelistic meetings. Also, the “bringers” may come with their friends as part of their personal follow up. Many people who come to Christ by this pathway simply report to their friends that they came to Christ on a particular Sunday; but some come and tell a pastor or officer after the service. We do not “ask for decisions” in the worship service, but we are becoming more systematic about having officers present to pray with seekers after the services. 3. Cell group pathway. Redeemer is using the basic “cell group model” popularized in overseas urban areas. This is much better for evangelism than the traditional Bible

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study approach. With the intimate oversight of the cell model, leaders/ facilitators may be newer Christians themselves. The regular support /oversight makes it possible to drive cell groups to regular invite more people into it. In addition, we expect to put most of the groups once or twice a year into an “outreach dessert” mode. (A target ministry of our church, “Business and Professional Outreach” enables that and has done 20 outreach desserts in one month this spring.)

The cell group pathway can work in two directions: a) The seeker is invited to the group and then comes to worship, or b) the seeker comes to church and is invited quickly into a group. In either case, the real evangelism happens more in the group than in the worship service.⁴ Felt need ministry pathway. Redeemer promotes divorce recovery workshops and groups, a ministry for people seeking jobs, a ministry to people with AIDS, several specific support groups, and a small counseling ministry. In addition to these “target ministries”, there is an extensive Singles network which attracts people looking for social connection through recreational events. All of these are entry points, and constitute a fourth pathway into the church. People come in response to an invitation to one of these events because it addresses a personal need. Often they are then drawn into the worship.⁵ Large Group Special Events. Occasionally, the church puts on a special concert (surrounding Christmas or Easter) or a “Comedy Night” or “Hot Topic Seminar” on sex, money, work or power! Or Pastor’s Gabfests. These are most like a traditional “evangelistic” event. A number of people have entered the church through them. Along with the whole “spiritual culture” of networking evangelism, they are very effective. But if the overall “networking culture” is missing, evangelistic special meetings won’t work well.

6. Alliances with other evangelistic ministries. There are a number of ministries which are reaching out to executives, international students, actors/actresses, college students-many of whom use Redeemer as a place to worship and to then bring friends/relatives who cannot be won to Christ by the ministry that won them. It takes all kinds of modes! To “ally” may mean to formally endorse and support, or simply have staff preach and teach at the para-church functions and give moral support.

Follow-up in the Networking Church

Pastors, officers, cell group leaders and other mature Christians in the church **MUST** be skilled at Networking follow-up. The new believer will bring non-Christians to church who will have questions and issues that they cannot address. Therefore, in a variety of ways, more mature Christians must be trained to do networking one-on-one evangelism. This usually means meeting over a meal for 3 or 4 times to talk about the gospel. Rapid follow-up will only happen if the church is saturated by cell groups. Otherwise, the staff will have to do it all.

A procedure:

- a).** Diagnosis. Ask: “where are you with Christianity?
are you Dissatisfied - Do you find aspects of Christianity unacceptable, distasteful?
What is your trouble with Christianity? Where is your beef?
Indifferent - Do you find Christianity simply unappetizing or irrelevant?
Where does Christianity fail to challenge you?
What would be relevant to you?
Cautiously interested - Are you in a learning mode, interested, gathering information, and yet not completely understanding?
What still does not make sense to you?

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Actively seeking, yet hesitant - Are you really searching for Christ, but find some fears hold you back? Does it seem to cost a lot and you are wondering about that? What costs give you pause? Make lists of issues after you have asked them these questions, and then you come back in the next 3 or 4 meetings and address these questions.

b). Presentation. A good approach is to use C.S.Lewis' argument from desire. (See "Hope" in Mere Christianity. See our church's pamphlet, "What does it mean to Know God?")

i.) If you are not finding yourself unsatisfied in life, you are either very young or very superficial. If you are successful in your goals, there is a "low growl" of emptiness; if you are unsuccessful, there is a "deafening roar" of emptiness.

ii.) Once you discover that, there is only 4 possibility-blame the things in your life, blame yourself, blame the universe/God, blame your separation from God!

iii.) A gospel outline can be the one in the "What does it mean to Know God?" brochure. Or the Evangelism Explosion outline. Or chapter 1 in John Guest's Go for It.

c). Handling Problems. *A basic approach:*

i.) You must see that you are already committed to religious, faith values. You already base your life on faith assumptions. All values of any sort are based on religious commitments.

ii.) Where do you get your faith assumptions? Don't you see they are arbitrary, just taken out of thin air? If you can believe anything you want to believe, then anyone can act any way they want. Arbitrariness destroys itself. Imagine if someone says to you, "I have a right to believe you are a child molester!" Why then do you do with God what you would not let anyone do with you?

iii.) There is no certainty without faith (think of how you hire people at the office!) The main way to begin to believe is to doubt your doubts? Why should you doubt everything but your cynicism?