

MEET THE **SKEPTIC**

A Field Guide to Faith Conversations

written and designed by **BILL FOSTER**

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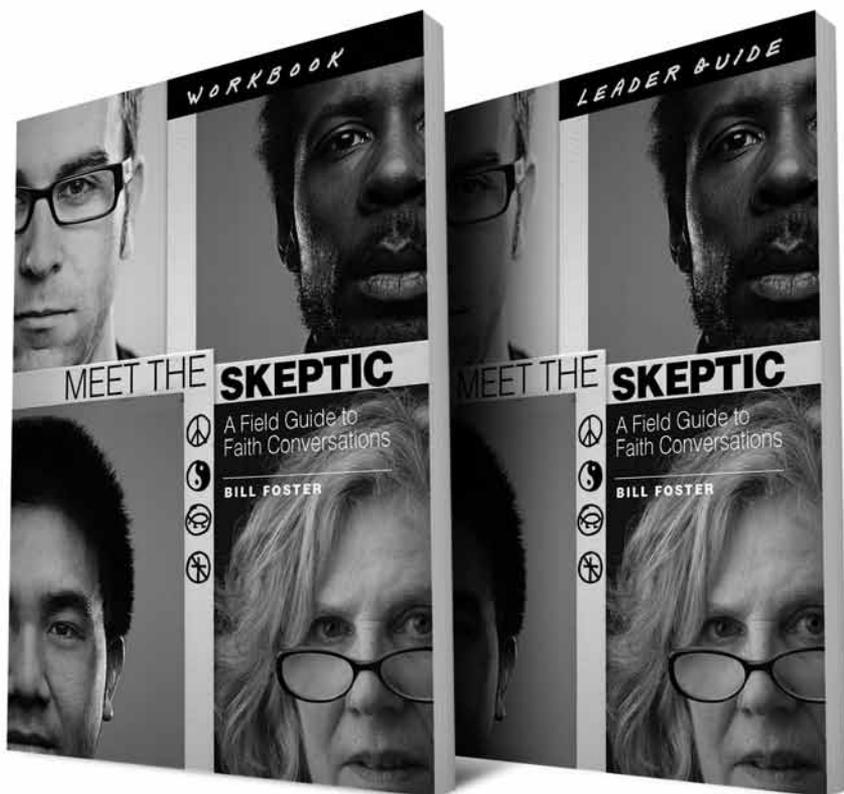
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WHY THIS BOOK IS DIFFERENT

What is a skeptic? For our purposes, skeptics are people who discard the biblical worldview in favor of other ways to see the world. Some had nonbelieving parents. Some had believing parents who were legalistic. Some have been deceived by false teachers and false religions. Some have been turned off by hypocrites. Some have put their trust in material success and their own abilities. Some have been influenced by skeptical academics and experts. We meet them every day at work, in class, at the gym, and in the grocery store. We are long past the time of dropping a biblical reference into a conversation and expecting its significance to be recognized. Our post-Christian culture requires us to do more remedial work with potential believers in order to make an impact.

Because there are so many diverse ideas out there, we need to cross-train ourselves to be ready for scrutiny and skepticism. But skepticism provides a great opportunity; it gives us a platform to explain why we believe what we believe. It shows us where the need for truth is. Even if we don't get the chance to mention Jesus, that doesn't mean we can't reveal truth that ultimately leads to Him.

Conversations with skeptics can become a game of fetch. A skeptic tosses out a sound-bite objection and the believer tries to retrieve an answer. If the believer is familiar with the objection or happens to have collected some sound bites of his own, he* may offer a specific answer. If he is not familiar with the objection, he may fall back on a "churchism" such as *"God said it. I believe it. That settles it!"* or *"You just have to have faith."**** He may also lunge for a Bible verse, get defensive, try to discredit the skeptic's source, or become too frustrated to say anything.

But even if the believer is able to recall just the right piece of information for a valid answer, where does it get him?

*Masculine pronouns used throughout for brevity.

**My criticism of Christian clichés does not reflect an Emergent Church philosophy that rejects these kinds of responses only to replace them with its own relativistic views (p.72).

The skeptic will just follow it up with another objection, sending the believer scrambling again. This tactic prevents the believer from making a meaningful point and from understanding how the skeptic really sees the world.

Believers get discouraged because they think they must learn an encyclopedia of answers. But trying to memorize a loose collection of answers and then waiting for an objection that matches them is a clumsy way to prepare. Unlike Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses, who although misinformed undergo extensive training, evangelicals are taught to spread the gospel (evangelize), but many are poorly equipped to pre-evangelize the post-Christian culture. And although there are plenty of great apologetics* resources available, Christians lack a model for how to apply them. We hold the keys, but we don't have a key ring on which to hang them.

Meet the Skeptic addresses this problem. It does not try to be a replacement for conventional apologetics or de-emphasize the need to study specific issues. Rather, it provides believers a mental framework for learning and responding to worldviews rather than objections.

Answering objections should not be our primary concern; we should first recognize and engage the worldviews feeding those objections. The method in this book stresses understanding worldviews as categories. We can do this by identifying the big ideas (herein called "Root Ideas") at the core of a skeptic's objections.

By training you in four basic worldview categories and a few conversational tools, this book will help you become a better critical thinker, articulator, and defender of your biblical worldview. You should not be intimidated or offended by skeptics' objections to the biblical worldview. Objections are opportunities. They reveal a nonbeliever's need for truth, and they challenge us to make our faith relevant.

*Giving a reasoned defense of the faith (Phil. 1:7, 1Pet. 3:15)

COLOSSIANS 4:2-6

Devote yourselves to prayer,
being watchful and thankful.

And pray for us, too, that God
may open a door for our message,
so that we may proclaim the mystery
of Christ, for which I am in chains.

Pray that I may proclaim it clearly,
as I should.

Be wise in the way you act
toward outsiders; make the most
of every opportunity.

Let your conversation be always
full of grace, seasoned with salt,
so that you may know how
to answer everyone.

At this point Festus interrupted Paul's defense. "You are out of your mind, Paul!" he shouted. "Your great learning is driving you insane."

"I am not insane, most excellent Festus," Paul replied. "What I am saying is true and reasonable."

Then Agrippa said to Paul, "Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?"*

- Acts 26:24-25, 28

1: MAKING YOUR FAITH RELEVANT

My friend: “So, Jesus was born of a virgin?”

C'mon, Bill, you don't really believe that, do you?”

Me: “...err...uh...well, the Bible says...”

This is an excerpt from a conversation I had with a friend back in college. His remark showed that he was already unimpressed with what the Bible had to say, so my desperate lunge for a Bible quote fell on deaf ears. He believed that the Bible was no more authoritative than a supermarket tabloid. He also thought I had inherited my belief system from my parents, that I had accepted it without examination. In one sense, he was right.

Up to this point, my faith was based more on experience (conviction, confession, repentance, forgiveness) than on something concrete. This did not invalidate my faith, but it also did not make it any more accessible for most skeptics. Regarding my friend's objection, I believed in the virgin birth because I believed the Bible, but I wasn't able to share reasons for why the Bible is believable. My beliefs had not encountered much resistance; they had been affirmed by godly family and friends. The only problem was that none of them were around to help. I didn't know how to put spiritual truth in real terms for nonbelievers. It was time for me to take off the training wheels and learn how to explain why I believed what I believed to someone with a different worldview. I needed this experience and others like it to motivate me to become a better student of my faith. What had I really learned from being a Christian since the age of twelve? From Sunday school? From years of sitting in the church pew?

but I'm not a scholar

"In religion and politics people's beliefs and convictions are in almost every case gotten at second-hand, and without examination, from authorities who have not themselves examined the questions at issue but have taken them at second-hand from other non-examiners, whose opinions about them were not worth a brass farthing."¹

- Mark Twain

Both skeptics and Christians are guilty of not thinking through their beliefs. Clichés and bumper-sticker wisdom are examples of unexamined philosophy that we all fall back on at times. Many skeptics don't know why they believe what they believe and merely parrot the clichés of today's culture with expressions such as: "*All religions are the same*"; "*Against abortion? Don't have one*"; "*That's true for you but not true for me*"; "*Science has disproven the Bible*"; and "*Christianity is so exclusive!*"

Christians resort to churchisms such as: "*Let go and let God*"; "*Love the sinner, hate the sin*"; "*I have Jesus in my heart*"; "*God said it. I believe it. That settles it!*" As Twain put it, are these responses "*worth a brass farthing*"?

Although being a scholar is not a prerequisite for being an effective believer, we all should be able to explain in basic language how our faith is different and why it makes sense. The term "thinking Christian" should not be an oxymoron.

A potential-believer friend of mine recently made a discouraging observation. He said, "*It's funny, when I ask people who say they are Christians if they believe the Bible is inerrant, many of them say, 'No.'* And when I ask Christians who do believe the Bible is inerrant why they believe it, they say something like, '*You just have to have faith.*'"

Would these answers motivate you to learn more about Christianity if you were an unbeliever? Although it's true that "you can't just reason people to Jesus," it is also true that ignorance won't win them over. Reasonable arguments are

necessary to raise their interest, give them food for thought, and demonstrate the credibility of Christians and Christianity.

winning and losing

Arthur: "Now stand aside, worthy adversary."

Black Knight: "'Tis but a scratch."

Arthur: "A scratch? Your arm's off!"

Black Knight: "No, it isn't."

Arthur: "Well, what's that then?" (pointing to severed arm)

Black Knight: "I've had worse."²

- *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (1975)

How often after disagreeing with someone have they responded to you with, "*Wow! You got me there...that is truly a convincing argument. I admit I will have to reverse my beliefs on this matter and change the way I live*"? Even if your argument did convince them, are they going to admit it in front of you? Not likely. Everyone has their pride to protect.

If, like me, you are competitive, you need to resist the tendency to try to win the discussion. You could make a great argument and be completely ignored ("*When you tell them all this, they will not listen to you; when you call to them, they will not answer*" [Jer. 7:27]). The important thing is to leave the door open for future conversations. Don't sever the relationship by trying to win. As Christian apologist Ravi Zacharias is fond of saying, "*Once you've cut off a person's nose, there's no point giving him a rose to smell.*"³ The right attitude may earn you another chance later (1 Pet. 3:15).

Understand that our task is not to convert or even to convince them; it is to *communicate truth*. We can't expect logical arguments alone to convert skeptics—only the Holy Spirit can do that. But when challenged, we need to be able to show that the biblical worldview makes sense, and that skepticism is a dead end when it comes to answering life's questions. What the skeptic does with that information is up to him.

Does not the ear test words as the
tongue tastes food?

- Job 12:11

2: TEST THEIR WORDS

start with a question

Asking questions before spitting out answers is the key to clarifying language and to moving beyond bumper-sticker reasoning. If the skeptic is noticeably antagonistic, first ask, “Do you really want an answer?” If he is just baiting you, there is no need to go any further. But if he is receptive, start with a question such as: “How so?”; “What do you mean by that?”; or “What I hear you saying is...” Here is an example of a conversation my wife had with a gentleman at the gym—we’ll call him Jack—who questioned why she was reading a book supporting biblical creation:

Jack: “I believe in evolution. If God had something to do with it, he’s not involved now.”

My wife: “Why do you think that?”

Jack: “Because if God was involved now, there wouldn’t be so much bad stuff.”

My wife: “Like what?”

Jack: “...Well, you know, suffering.”

My wife: “Do you know someone who is suffering?”

Jack: “Yeah...my wife.”

Although the scientific subject matter (creation versus evolution) triggered the conversation, Jack’s objection really concerned suffering, not science. He needed to know why God would let anyone suffer.*

listen for RED-FLAG Words

Words can depict reality as it really is or they can twist it. Words shape the culture. An integral tool in this book is the Red-Flag-Words list included in each category. These are words skeptics falsely redefine. For example, if a skeptic said that you were being “intolerant” because you disagreed with

*See *BONUS POINT I* for a response to this difficult question.