

CRAWFORD BAPTIST CHURCH · MOBILE, AL

Hospitality at the Table

Reaching atheists & agnostics - a people of hospitality in a culture of hostility

Evangelism Training Series · Week 7



PART 01

Know who you're reaching

Two different people - and neither is the enemy.

Both are our neighbors, made in the image of God, with an eternal soul.
Let's be clear and charitable about what they believe.

KNOW WHO YOU'RE REACHING

Atheism - "There is no God."

A claim about reality: only the material world is real - you're a clump of cells that evolved by chance. Most atheists prize logic and evidence, and many believe science has ruled God out. (We take that on in Part 4.)



What it claims

No God, no soul, no life after death. You are matter - and nothing more.



The "New Atheism" era

The loud 2000s wave - Dawkins, Hitchens, Harris, Dennett. Hitchens' line: religion "poisons everything."



Where it is now

That angry movement has largely faded. Today's skeptic usually isn't hostile - just distant and indifferent.

KNOW WHO YOU'RE REACHING

Agnosticism - "We can't know."

A claim about knowledge, not existence: "I don't know, and maybe no one can." This is the growing group - in two very different flavors:



The hopeful agnostic

"I don't know - but I hope there's more."
Often: "if there is a God, I've done enough good that I'll be okay."
Meaning-hungry and open - the growing group.



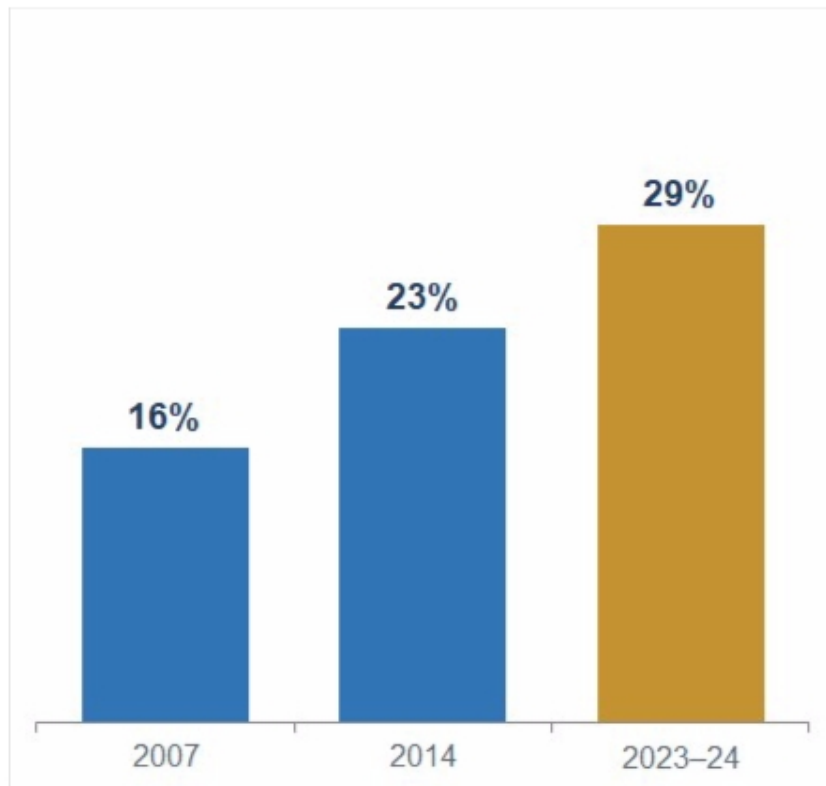
The apathetic agnostic

"Maybe, maybe not - and I'm probably fine either way." Not hostile, just checked out. Apathy, not evidence, is the barrier. You awaken a longing, not win a debate.

Both are reached the same way - through relationship and a seat at your table.

THE DATA - DOMESTICALLY

The mission field grew - then leveled off



5% · 6% · 19%

Atheist 5%, agnostic 6%, “nothing in particular” 19%. Most “nones” aren’t hardened - just unsure.

#1 group

The unaffiliated are now the single largest group in the U.S.

~7 in 10

still believe in God or a higher power. The door is wide open.

*“Nones” as a share of U.S. adults; the rise leveled off ~2020.
“The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few.” - Matthew 9:37*

Source: Pew Research Center, Religious Landscape Study 2023-24.

PART 02

The How

“The church should be a people of hospitality in a culture of hostility.”

Not louder arguments - speak the truth in love, and set a table. This was Jesus' own working method.

THE HOW

Hospitality means “love of the stranger”

The New Testament word is ***philoxenia*** - love (phileo) of the stranger (xenos). The opposite of *xeno-phobia*. Not hosting your tribe - opening your life to the outsider who doesn't think, look, or believe like you.



Romans 12:13

“...pursuing hospitality.” The word means to chase it down - it's a command, not a personality type.



Hebrews 13:2

“Show hospitality to strangers” - some have entertained angels unaware.



Ephesians 2:12–19

We were once “strangers and aliens” ourselves - now brought near and made “fellow citizens... of God's household.”

We don't welcome the stranger because we're better than him - we welcome him because we were him.

THE HOW

It was Jesus' working method

The Son of God did the bulk of His ministry around meals - aimed at the people the religious world had written off. The table is where hope broke in.



Levi · Zacchaeus · the Samaritan woman

He feasted with tax collectors (Luke 5:29–32), saved Zacchaeus at dinner (Luke 19:1–10), stayed two days with a Samaritan village (John 4).



“A friend of tax collectors and sinners”

They meant it as an insult (Luke 7:34). He wore it as His mission - “to seek and to save that which was lost” (Luke 19:10).



The early church did the same

Breaking bread house to house (Acts 2:46); Peter with Cornelius (Acts 10); Lydia, the jailer (Acts 16). “I was a stranger, and you invited Me in” (Matthew 25:35).

THE HOW

Not “drive-by” evangelism - relationship



The “drive-by” approach

Tracts, parking lots, door-to-door. Not wrong - God uses them, and they shine where people have no access to the gospel.



The Deep South reality

A post-Christian South already knows of Jesus - and is still lost. Familiarity replaced surrender. That's reached by a relationship: a table, a name, time.

1 Thessalonians 2:8 - *“not only the gospel of God but also our own lives.”* John 1:14 - *the Word “became flesh, and dwelt among us.”* Make disciples, not converts.

THE HOW · A LIVING EXAMPLE

Rosaria Butterfield: an extra plate

A tenured, feminist, LGBT-activist professor - a committed enemy of Christianity - met Christ not at a rally and not through a book, but at a dinner table.



One kind letter, then dinner - ~500 meals

A Reformed pastor, Ken Smith, and his wife Floy welcomed her into their ordinary, messy home for two years. No bait-and-switch. They kept setting an extra plate.



“Radically ordinary hospitality”

Not Martha-Stewart performance - regular, unglamorous, open-door, aimed at strangers and even “enemies” of the gospel. (Her book is warmly commended in Reformed circles.)



The proof of tonight’s thesis

God reached one of His most committed opponents through a family that simply opened its home. He is not done.

PART 03

Who is Jesus?

But first - can they trust the record?

If they don't trust the Bible, the gospel never gets off the ground. So we start there
- then ask, "What do you think of Jesus?"

WHO IS JESUS • THE FOUNDATION

First: can you trust the Bible?

You can hand out tracts and share the gospel all day - but if someone doesn't trust the Bible, you never get off the ground. So start here:



“Written by men” isn’t “unreliable”

God carried human authors along - 2 Timothy 3:16, 2 Peter 1:21. The question isn't who held the pen; it's whether it was preserved and really happened.



Trust it as history first

They don't have to believe it's inspired to begin. Invite them to weigh it like any historical record - and it holds up better than any.



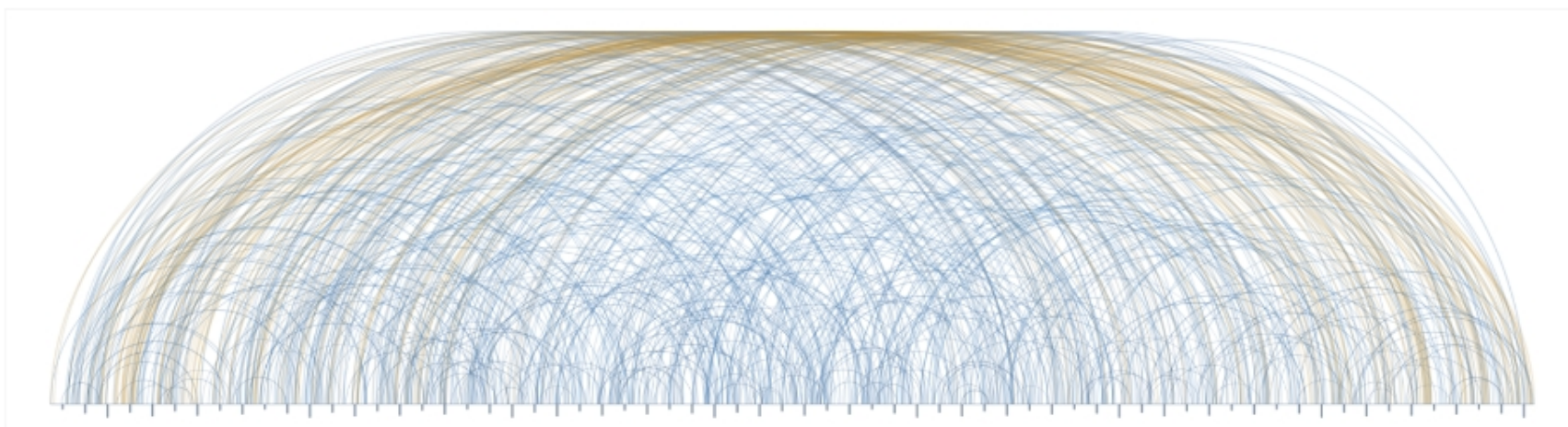
Then read it together

“Have you ever actually read a Gospel? Read one with me.” The Word is “living and active” (Hebrews 4:12); faith comes by hearing it (Romans 10:17).

WHO IS JESUS · THE EVIDENCE

One book. One story. One Author.

66 books · about 40 authors · ~1,500 years · 3 continents (Asia, Africa, Europe) · 3 languages (Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek). Kings, shepherds, a doctor, fishermen, a tax collector, prisoners-who never met - and yet one seamless story.



63,779 cross-references weave the 66 books together (Harrison & Römhild).

It opens and closes on the same note: **a tree of life and a river in Eden (Genesis 2)** return as **a tree of life and a river in the New Jerusalem (Revelation 22)** - written ~1,500 years apart. No committee planned that. It points to one Author (2 Timothy 3:16).

WHO IS JESUS • THE EVIDENCE

The Bible isn't a game of "telephone"

The common worry: copied so many times, it must be corrupted. Wes Huff's specialty is exactly this - and the opposite is true.



More, and earlier, than anything ancient

Over 5,800 Greek manuscripts - far more than any other ancient text. The earliest, P52 (a fragment of John), dates to about AD 125 and was found in Egypt, far from where John wrote - so it was already circulating widely within a generation.



Not telephone - a family tree we can check

Telephone is one whisper down a line. This is thousands of copies from many places we can compare. A copy from ~AD 200 checked against one from ~AD 350 - they match. Stability, not drift.



The differences don't change the message

Nearly all variants are spelling or word order. No core doctrine hangs on a disputed line - even the skeptic Bart Ehrman agrees.

"The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God stands forever." - Isaiah 40:8 (LSB)

It reads like history, not legend



Eyewitnesses, not fairy tales

2 Peter 1:16 - “we did not follow cleverly devised tales... we were eyewitnesses.” Luke “investigated everything carefully” (Luke 1:3).



An eyewitness list, written early

1 Corinthians 15:3–8 is a creed from within a few years of the cross - the risen Jesus appeared to more than 500, most still alive to ask.



Even skeptics grant He was real

Agnostic scholar Bart Ehrman: Jesus certainly existed. Non-Christians Josephus and Tacitus mention Him too.



It all hinges on the resurrection

“If Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless” (1 Corinthians 15:17). People don’t die for what they know is a lie.

WHO IS JESUS • THE EVIDENCE

The spade keeps proving it right

Over and over, skeptics said “the Bible names people and places that never existed” - and the shovel proved the Bible right.



Kings and rulers, confirmed in stone

The Hittites (once called a myth); the “House of David” (Tel Dan Stele); Pontius Pilate (the Pilate Stone); Caiaphas the high priest (his burial box).



Places dismissed - then dug up

John’s Pool of Bethesda and Pool of Siloam, both doubted, both found exactly as described. Sennacherib’s own record confirms his siege (2 Kings 18–19).



A skeptic who set out to disprove it

Archaeologist Sir William Ramsay tried to prove Luke wrong - and concluded Luke was a first-rate historian, and became a Christian.

WHO IS JESUS • HIS OWN CLAIMS

“A good teacher - for His time”

The dodge: *“A good moral teacher for His day - but antiquated now.”* It doesn’t survive what He actually said:

“ Authority to forgive sins

Mark 2:5–7

“Before Abraham was born, I am.”

John 8:58

“I and the Father are one.”

John 10:30

“I am the way, the truth, and the life.”

John 14:6

Jesus did not leave us the option of “just a good teacher.” He forced a decision - Lewis’s whole point.

C.S. Lewis: Lord, liar, or lunatic

LIAR

Claimed to be God knowing it false - and died for it. Doesn't fit His moral depth.

LUNATIC

Sincerely deluded - like a man who thinks he's a poached egg. Doesn't fit His wisdom.

LORD

His claims are simply true. The option that fits the man and the evidence.

Watch for a 4th L - Legend: “the church made it up later.” Answer: the God-claims are in the earliest sources - there wasn't time for legend to grow.

PART 04

The hard questions

“Hasn’t science ruled God out - and if He’s real, why suffering?”

The big intellectual objections a logical skeptic will raise. Handle them with honesty - not bluffing.

“Science has disproved God”

Nothing science has discovered has ever refuted the Bible - if anything, the evidence points toward a Maker. Three calm replies (no science degree required):



Science answers HOW - not WHY

It's brilliant at how the world works. It can't tell you why there's a world at all, or what it means. Different questions - not rivals. (Wes Huff's key move.)



It can't disprove what's beyond nature

Science studies the physical world. Asking it to disprove God is like a metal detector hunting for wood - wrong tool. “No proof” isn't disproof.



The evidence points to a beginning

The Big Bang says the universe began - “In the beginning, God” (Genesis 1:1). Lemaître, who first proposed it, was a priest. Modern science was born from a Christian view of an orderly world.

“The heavens are telling of the glory of God.” - Psalm 19:1 (LSB)

THE HARD QUESTIONS · SCIENCE

You can't look at this and see an accident

The instinct is right: this world was *made*. Three places design shows itself - examples you can actually use:



The fine-tuning of the universe

The constants are balanced on a razor's edge for life - the cosmological constant to 1 part in 10^{120} . Atheist Fred Hoyle: it looks like "a superintellect has monkeyed with physics."



The information written into life

DNA is a code - a language, a digital library in every cell. Information always comes from a mind. Software with no programmer takes more faith than God.



Machines that can't be built halfway

The flagellum's rotary motor, ATP synthase, blood-clotting - all parts needed at once (Behe's "irreducible complexity"). "I am fearfully and wonderfully made" (Psalm 139:14).

"...His invisible attributes... have been clearly seen... so that they are without excuse." - Romans 1:20 (LSB)

THE HARD QUESTIONS · SCIENCE

“Evolution means we don’t need God”

Christians differ on the age of the earth - don’t get dragged into that fight. The topic doesn’t touch what matters most:



It doesn’t explain why anything exists

Evolution describes how life changed. It says nothing about why there’s a universe, or where the first life and matter came from.



Don’t take the bait - lift the question

You won’t win a science debate on the spot, and don’t need to. “Even if that’s how life formed - who started it all, and why?”



Atoms can’t give you meaning or morality

If we’re just time + matter + chance, where do love, justice, and real right-and-wrong come from? We live as if they’re real - that points to a Maker.

“In Him we live and move and exist.” - Acts 17:28 (LSB)

The intellectual version

The oldest objection - *Epicurus posed it, Hume sharpened it*: if God is all-good and all-powerful, why evil? Honest responses:



“Evil” assumes a standard - God’s

To call anything truly evil you’re borrowing a fixed standard of good. Without God, “evil” is just “things I don’t like.” The outrage points to God.



Love requires freedom

Forced love isn’t love. A world of free creatures is one where evil is possible. (Alvin Plantinga’s free-will defense.)



God is sovereign even over evil

The worst act ever - the cross - was, at once, “the predetermined plan... of God” (Acts 2:23). He didn’t stay distant; He entered it, and turned it to good (Genesis 50:20).

“God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God.” - Romans 8:28 (LSB)

Usually it's not an argument - it's a wound



Grieve - don't win

A syllogism wounds a bleeding person twice. Sit in it. "That's heavy. Tell me what happened." Jesus wept at a grave He was about to open (John 11:35). Weep first.



A God who suffered too

Our hope isn't a God who explains pain from a distance, but One who entered it and beat it. One day He wipes away every tear (Revelation 21:4).

"He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds." - Psalm 147:3 (LSB)

Other objections - a calm first reply



“Who made God, then?”

Dawkins' challenge. Only things that begin need a cause. God had no beginning - the question misfires.



“Religion poisons everything.”

Hitchens' line. Don't defend abuses; point to Christ - and note atheist regimes killed millions too.



“All religions are the same.”

They make contradictory claims - so they can't all be true. Where you heard it doesn't make it false.



“Faith is just wishful thinking.”

Faith isn't believing with no reasons - it's trust based on good ones, like trusting a bridge or a surgeon.

1 Peter 3:15 - make your defense “with gentleness and respect.” “Great question,” and “I don't fully know - let's find out together.”

More objections you'll hear



"The Old Testament God is a moral monster."

Dawkins. The Canaanite judgment was judicial, after centuries of warning (Genesis 15:16); OT "slavery" was regulated debt-servitude - kidnapping was a capital crime (Exodus 21:16). (See Copan.)



"You'd believe differently if born elsewhere."

Where you learn a thing doesn't make it false (the genetic fallacy) - and it cuts both ways: his atheism is just as "geographic." Truth is settled by evidence.



"Miracles are impossible."

Hume's argument assumes there's no God who could act - the very question. If God is real, He can act in His own world. The resurrection rests on evidence.



"Why is God hidden?"

He isn't - creation, conscience, Scripture, and Christ. The problem is usually the heart, not the evidence (John 3:19). Love can't be forced at gunpoint.

Also common: the "copycat myth" claim, "a loving God wouldn't send people to hell," and "I can be good without God."

KEEP GOING

To dig deeper this week

Reaching skeptics

Rosaria Butterfield, *The Gospel Comes with a House Key*
Rebecca McLaughlin, *Confronting Christianity*
Greg Koukl, *Tactics*

The Bible & the resurrection

Wesley Huff, *YouTube · Rogan · Diary of a CEO*
Peter J. Williams, *Can We Trust the Gospels?*
Habermas & Licona, *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus*

Science & design

John Lennox, *God's Undertaker*
Stephen Meyer, *Signature in the Cell*
Michael Behe, *Darwin's Black Box*

Evil & suffering

D. A. Carson, *How Long, O Lord?*
Timothy Keller, *Walking with God through Pain & Suffering*
C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*

The Old Testament / hard texts

Paul Copan, *Is God a Moral Monster?*
Gleason Archer, *Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties*

Former skeptics worth hearing

C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*
Nabeel Qureshi, *Seeking Allah, Finding Jesus*
Justin Brierley, *The Surprising Rebirth of Belief in God*

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