Connecting with Peers

FOUNDATIONS FOR CHRISTIAN SCHOLARS | WEEK FOUR

IN THIS WEEK'S STUDY

1. Discussion Guide
2. "The Relativistic Bog"
3. Finding Common Ground: An Interview with Tim Downs

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1. **From Acts 17.** What led Paul to address the people of Athens?

2. How does Paul begin his ministry here? How does he respond to the philosophers in the Areopogus?

3. Paul tried to establish common ground with his audience by praising what he could and then proceeded to reason with them in a respectful way. How do you see his apologetic strategy develop?

4. What was the result?

5. What has been your experience in your department as you've tried to establish common ground and reach others? Sneering? Questioning? Embracing? Does anyone even know you're a Christian?

APPLICATION

Tim Downs wrote ***Finding Common Ground: How to Communicate with Those Outside the Faith While We Still Can***. In an interview with Grad Resources, Tim talks about the importance of having a long-term perspective as we interact with our graduate student peers. Intentional effort is needed to steer everyday conversations about current events, personal struggles, or departmental issues toward meaningful spiritual discussion. It is taking a long-term "Sower's Approach" to outreach rather than a short-term "Harvesting Approach". Begin by committing ourselves to be available to God for His use. List five people in your department whom you would like to see come to faith. Pray for them daily. Think of how Jesus has made a difference in your life. Then look for opportunities to connect (say, over coffee or lunch) in a discussion of significance. Remember that we are told that HE draws people to Himself (John 6:44) and we simply need to abide, be dependent, and available. The Relativistic Bog article is one way to present the claims of Jesus in the midst of so many varied opinions.

THE RELATIVISTIC BOG

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Aristotle, the Greek philosopher, wrote, "Philosophy begins with a sense of wonder," and concluded that the human mind cannot be satisfied until it has risen to the knowledge of the highest things. The mathematician Blaise Pascal claimed: "there is a God-shaped vacuum in the heart of every human being." The French existentialist Albert Camus wrote, "There is only one really serious philosophical problem, that of suicide. To judge that life is or is not worth the trouble of being lived, this is to reply to the fundamental question of philosophy."1 Although Pascal, Aristotle and Camus represent very different points of view, their remarks point to the same basic human characteristic: we seek more than the assurance of food, drink, and warmth to make us happy.

Instead, we want answers to questions about the meaning of life. When we ask "Who am I?", "What is my purpose?", "Is there a God?", and "If so, what is God like?" or "What does God have to do with me or my purpose?" we tip our hand: each of us is on a quest to make sense out of the fragmentary pieces of our existence.

When we go about the task of making sense out of life, we unconsciously rely on a set of beliefs that we already hold. These beliefs act as a sorting mechanism, or filter. They help us figure out which experiences are more meaningful, important, or relevant than others. These beliefs, even if we are not consciously aware of them, are among the most important things about us. They determine which questions we will ask, and which answers to these question we will consider. In this short essay, I will suggest a method for building and testing an adequate belief system.

EVERYONE HAS AN OPINION

The intellectual structure that we use to interpret the world is called a "worldview". On one level it can be argued that there are as many worldviews as there are individuals. Yet, we can identify some basic classes of worldviews. For example, the problem of the existence of God can be approached in at least five different ways, each way leading to a different solution. Let's catalog them briefly, according to the different conclusions they reach.

> **Terry (classical theism):** "Good things like the order and beauty of nature or our capacity for love and hope suggest an Ultimate Source of goodness. This maximally good being we call God, who is perfect in intelligence, power, and goodness."
>
> **Chris (finite or "process" theism):** "The endless history of war, famine, suffering and death suggests that if a divine being exists at all, this deity is necessarily imperfect, or limited, in intelligence, power, or concern for humankind."

Dale (monism): "God cannot be viewed as either good or evil because God subsumes everything, including what we think is good and evil, in the divine Oneness of Being. God is everything and everything is God."

Robin (naturalism): "Nature needs no explanation: it is simply all there is, or ever could be. God is a superfluous hypothesis, an unnecessary extra, for supposedly explaining the cosmos. The material universe has no more fundamental cause than the interplay of matter, energy, time, and chance."

Kim (subjective idealism): "The external world is merely an illusion. The most that I have access to is the interior of my mind. Because of this subject-object uncertainty, questions regarding 'ultimate beings somewhere out there' become irrelevant, imaginary, or nonsensical."

How can we respond to such a variety of viewpoints? One natural response is to say that everyone is right, that each one has discovered what is "true for me". This response is called "relativism". Relativism seems safe, because we never have to say, "I think I'm right and you're wrong." However, this avoidance of disagreement comes at a high price: it muddles the question of truth.

Views as contrary as these five cannot be all true, since they contradict one another. The only way we can say that they are all true is by watering down our concept of "truth". Then it becomes something that is purely subjective make-believe.

KNOWLEDGE THROUGH INFERENCE TO THE BEST EXPLANATION

If we are to escape the bog of intellectual pessimism, we must find some source of knowledge that is widely shared and on which we can base our judgments. One time-honored and widely cited source is called "inductive inference".

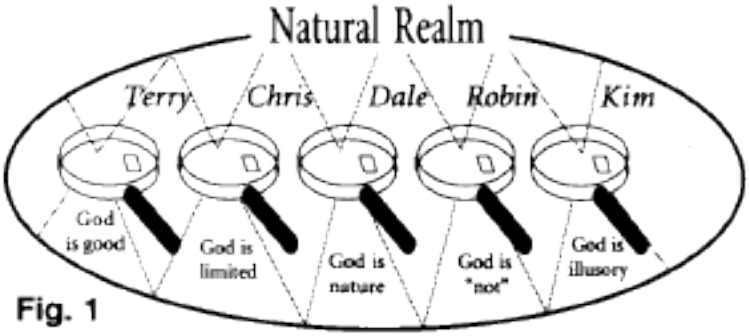

Fig. 1

An inference is a step or process of reasoning. In deductive inference, we make explicit what is already contained implicitly in our current stock of information. For example, if I know that all PhDs are over-educated, and that Paul is a PhD, I can infer deductively that Paul must be over-educated. In contrast, inductive inference involves taking a step beyond what is contained in the data at hand. Through inductive inference, our mind observes patterns in human experience and uses those patterns to form reasonable conjectures about unseen or not-yet-seen aspects of the world.

However, there are two important limitations or qualifications to this use of inductive inference to establish the nature of ultimate reality. First, there is no unanimity about which inferences to draw. People like Chris, Dale, Robin, and Kim above reach very different conclusions from the same evidence, and there is no universally agreed-upon method for settling these disputes. It appears that, at least in the real world, where people bear so many limitations and prejudices, the inductive method is not perfectly reliable. We need, therefore, an independent source of information about the existence and character of the ultimate reality, one that could corroborate or correct the tentative conclusions that we have based on inductive inference alone.

Second, even at its best, the inductive method leaves a number of vitally important questions unanswered. For instance, even if we conclude that God does exist, we would still want to know the answers to questions such as: "What does God expect of us? What does God think of us? Does God wish to enter into a more personal relationship with each of us, and if so, how? What, if anything, does God intend to do about our fate after death?" It would be nearly impossible for us to base any specific answer to these personal or existential questions merely upon general features of the universe around us.

DIVINE REVELATION IN HISTORY: A COMPLEMENTARY SOURCE

If we are to gain adequate answers to these existential questions about the "supernatural" realm (assuming for the moment that such a realm exists), then the supernatural must break into the natural realm and reveal the answers to us, using meaningful historical events and inspired messages. This is called "special" or "historical" revelation, in contrast to the so-called "general revelation" of ultimate reality in nature and in the structure of human consciousness. If such special revelation exists, then it has the potential of adding to what we have already discovered through inductive inference. Together, the two sources of knowledge help us to build a satisfactory worldview.

REVELATION'S PROBLEM IS CREDIBILITY

Revelation has a problem, though: the problem of credibility. The fact is that there are many documents and teachers that claim to reveal to us the nature of ultimate reality. How, then, are we to determine which one is the accurate revelation of God?

The question of "Which revelation?" appears to be even more puzzling than the question, "Which inductive inference?" However, we are not left entirely without direction. The competing sources of divine revelation championed by major religions, including the Bible or the Koran or the Book of Mormon, have included claims regarding:

(a) the supernatural foresight of its sacred writers (i.e., prophecy),
(b) the extraordinary life, words and deeds of its founder (i.e., miracles and wonders), and
(c) the transforming influence of the religion on the lives of real people (i.e., impact).

These three criteria, then, determine what shape an investigation into the credibility of any purported revelation must take. If Christianity, or any other alleged revelation, emerges as a clear winner over its rivals on these three points, then we are on solid ground in believing that its texts offer an objective reference point that bypasses the relativistic bog and points toward the possibility of knowing God.

CONCLUSION

We have seen that, to build a worldview, it would be helpful to use both inductive inference and historical revelation. These two methods are not mutually exclusive but complementary. We owe it to ourselves to use the best means available for gaining knowledge about God, ourselves, and our place in the universe.

However, as we use these methods we must face two facts. First, inductive inference is inherently limited as a means for discovering answers to all of our existential questions. Second, because there is more than one religion that claims divine revelation, we must find some way of weighing the credibility of each claim. It seems reasonable that a revelation worthy of contributing to our understanding of God must first demonstrate its credibility through fulfilled prophecy, credible miracles, and widespread impact.

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1 Aristotle's Metaphysics, Book Alpha, 982b10--983a10. Blaise Pascal, Pensees. Albert Camus, Le mythe de Sisyphe, as cited in Frederick Copleston, A History of Philosophy (New York:Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group, Inc., 1985) IX: 392.

FINDING COMMON GROUND: AN INTERVIEW WITH TIM DOWNS

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Graduate student outreach is an advanced ministry skill. The average graduate student requires a unique sensitivity from the one who desires to be an effective Sower.

In the book, *Finding Common Ground*, I addressed the issue of soil deficiencies. The Sower recognizes that certain soil elements are necessary for a person to be able to understand and believe the gospel. As Jesus said, there are good soils and bad soils, and each age has its characteristic soil deficiencies that challenge the growth of the gospel. The Sower's first job is to cultivate the soil--to work in the listener's life to create an atmosphere where belief is at least possible. She does this by learning to recognize her listener's specific soil deficiency, and then supplementing the soil in that area. But how does the Sower analyze the soil? Simply through conversation—and not necessarily about spiritual issues. General, day-to-day conversation can tell you a lot about a person's attitudes and beliefs.

In preparing to work with graduate students within a specific department, one should also take the time to do a soil analysis of the department itself. Let me illustrate this point by citing the example of a friend who is pursuing his Ph.D. (I'll call him Fred). There is a book Fred ought to write about his experiences in his department, but unfortunately it would be counterproductive for him to do so because it would destroy the rapport he has built so far.

He has had great success in his field of Cultural Studies. He has spent extensive time discovering the "sacred ground" in his department. For example, he can talk with other graduate students about social issues such as the plight of women, violence, or hate crimes because these are area of concerns to his peers. These are also major issues to Christians. However, he finds that he cannot talk to them in any negative way about homosexuality, feminism, or abortion. These issues are a part of their sacred center. He will make no progress with them spiritually or relationally, and they would marginalize him, thereby slamming all future doors.

He has had to spend a significant amount of time determining their hot buttons, asking himself questions such as, "What is sacred to their community? Which topics will be off limits or counter productive? In which areas do my interests as a graduate student overlap with those of my peers?" I believe this is the first step for any graduate student as a Sower. The answers to these questions may change from department to department, though on the average campus there are certain things that can be assumed to be hot buttons, shared interests, or potential pitfalls.

Some ask if it is not cowardly to purposely avoid topics like homosexuality or abortion simply because they are controversial. Should the Sower avoid these subjects all together?

In ministry, we always need to ask the question, "What do I want from this person?" Do I want my listener to change his mind about homosexuality or a political position? You may be passionate about

your social and political views, but they are not essential in the process of coming to Christ. I want to be careful of what I am using as my approach to the Gospel. Often our problem as Christians is that we bring lots of baggage to the Gospel and that extra baggage could prove a hindrance to a person's faith decision. These topics can be so loaded, so emotionally hot, they actually confound our ability to ever get to the Gospel. Soil analysis requires us to ask ourselves, "What are we trying to produce?"

The same can be said of certain academic theories or issues. These too may raise barriers to belief. If one makes the assumption that a "Young Earth" view of creation is a requirement to faith, secular grads may inwardly ask, "Do I have to compromise my scientific position to become a Christian?"

You could be implying, by leading off with a certain topic, that you are a social conservative or an academic outcast with an agenda, and these are strings attached to personal faith. Christians need to ask, "What is really necessary to the gospel and what is not? What are the inroads, the common sacred ground in this department where I can invite dialog with them without creating unnecessary barriers?" One excellent example is when Fred joined a group on campus, "Men Against Violence Against Women." They asked him to wear one of their T-shirts and he said, "Absolutely!" So here's Fred, a graduate student teaching a class, and he's wearing this T-shirt. He's building common ground with the people in his department. He is able to create some good relationships. Now this is what happened: as he's taken the time to understand their sacred ground and to promote their issues wherever he can, he finds them more open and more willing to talk about his sacred ground.

I think in any group there are similar circumstances, similar challenges, similar classes and professors, and these all represent opportunities for common ground. But you'll find individual cases as well. Let me give you another example. When looking at any grad department there seems to be a place that is THE common gathering place for the department. In Fred's department there is a couch. There is an uncomfortable vinyl sofa that they placed in the grad office. It's where every grad student takes a nap. He said it is an uncomfortable place on which to sit, but it is important to go there to take a nap from time to time, simply because everyone else does. In other words it is important for him to be where they are. It is another way of saying, "I occupy the space where you are; I go where you go."

Recently my son was taking a tour of NC State in their electrical engineering department. In that engineering department there is a lounge. All the grad students there told us, "This is where all the studying takes

place." It's too hard to study in the library, so all the students are in this lounge. That tells me that that's where I should go. So I might make cookies and take them to that lounge. I would make my face known in the lounge. I would take a nap on the sofa in the lounge. That is where I would hang.

Like the foreign missionary who studies a new culture for clues and insights, the grad ministry worker needs to discover what are the cultural issues, important values, habit patterns, language, and traditions of their peers. We need to not go in with our own assumptions but to figure out what makes this group tick. That may change from department to department or discipline by discipline, because in electrical engineering they've not even thought about what the humanities folks are discussing.

While the process of graduate student ministry might not be as simple or as transferable as ministry to undergrads might be (e.g. training in sharing the 4Laws), what is transferable is a set of skills. It is a

special methodology that depends on your ability to assess interest, make connections, and deliver thought provoking and appropriately challenging content.

When I wrote my book, Finding Common Ground, what I was thinking is: this is advanced ministry. Almost anybody can be trained to hand the ball off to someone else (or a booklet for that matter), but sowing is an advanced ministry skill. As you move into specialized realms, and certainly graduate studies is one of these, it is more difficult to become an insider. The level of exhaustion or stress is higher, the competition is intense, the potential for failure looms large, and the skill set for the Sower is more specialized.

Graduate students are an unreached people group. Reaching them requires the study of ethnology. If I could take my whole book and summarize it, I would say it this way: We need to approach America today as if we were visiting a third world country. We've made the foolish mistake of thinking we know this country because it's ours, and we don't. It's a collection of unreached people groups. But here we're too lazy to do what the overseas missionary knows he must do to survive.

Considering the value system of graduate education, some Sowers will need to develop a set of skills that their very graduate training is working against. In other words, graduate students are not encouraged to say, "I don't know." When asked a question within their field graduate students often hesitate to appear uninformed. However, the best response to a complicated worldview question (like why there is so much evil in the world) might be, "You know, I'm still working that through and I don't know that I have resolved all these things." It allows you to be seen as a co-struggler with them in issues that are challenging even for believers.

Along with a sincerely humble approach to apologetics and worldview issues, the grad Sower needs to develop interpersonal skills. While an organization like Grad Resources provides a National Crisis-Line, promotional phone cards, and Grad Survival Kits, without the relational connections, it is like throwing materials over a wall. A breakdown takes place at an interpersonal level between the grad Sower and the non-believing grad student; The breakdown is a lack of relationship. Christian graduate students need to focus on the interpersonal skills necessary to relate to their graduate peers. This is where Fred has done an excellent job. He can make good use of resources such as those Grad Resources provides because of what he's already done to create relationships with his peers. He was making the connections before the tools. He has established common ground.

Do an audience analysis of your own department and tell me about the people that you find there. Bring it down to the individual level. Tell me what they're feeling every day, tell me what they're thinking. What are their biggest struggles, their biggest pressures? What would most give them a break? What would be most refreshing? What you're looking for is a means of cracking some doors. I don't want to characterize this as friendship evangelism. It's far deeper than that, it is intentional evangelism. It is the quest for common ground within a department around shared life experience. In an environment that is extremely competitive, connections will make a difference.

Suppose I'm an organic chemist talking to another organic chemist. I'm starting to get to know you a little bit. We start feeling that we're in this together. I see that you have compassion, and that makes our relationship a safe environment. Safety is a key to allowing greater depth of communication. When you can say, "I'm not shocked by anything that you might say," we're free to go anywhere. And now that

the relationship is safe, as a Christian I might be able to say, “You know, don’t jump on me for this, but sometimes I’m not so sure about evolution.”

If I’ve created safety and connections, I’ve just opened a conversation with the guy and who knows what might come next. If he feels manipulated, or if it’s my first approach at even communicating with the guy, he’s not going to be very receptive. But if there’s a connection that’s been made and there’s a sense of safety, the doors are open. You can say, “I looked at this design theory stuff. Did you ever see this before? It makes me think. That’s all I’m saying.” But the safety has to be there.

If you sense an awkwardness due to the sensitivity of the topic, then it may be time to stop presenting answers for a while and begin asking questions. You might say, “There are some things I’m just passionate about and I’m sorry if I’ve offended you. What I’d love to do sometime is buy you lunch and let you to tell me more of your thoughts.”

One often-asked question is whether a Christian graduate student should in some way make it known up front in her department that she is a believer. Again, Fred can be used as an example. They know Fred is a believer because he learned to say it in their language. They don’t know everything Fred believes, and there is no reason to tell them everything he believes. This is what I refer to in my book as “shrewdness.”

Since he has learned to speak their language his Christian beliefs are considered another valued perspective in the diverse culture of the university. He can say, “I am a person of faith.” But he can’t say, “I’m a conservative evangelical.” I think if someone said to Fred, “So you’re born-again,” I don’t think he would accept that label. He knows what comes with the baggage of labels. He would rather talk about his beliefs in their terms. This is where the savvy of the Sower comes in.

When it comes to finding open doors for worldview discussions, there are a variety of topics. This issue of absolutes is a beautiful one. Alice Walker, author of The Color Purple, came and spoke at UNC/Chapel Hill. She said that she was going to the Middle East to participate in a demonstration against genital mutilation of women. When a student raised her hand and asked, “Are you not just attempting to impose your own cultural values on another country?” She replied, “That’s a bunch of nonsense. I’m going to make a difference and you can try to stop me if you want to.” She was saying, “Never mind postmodern ideals, I want to get something done, so the heck with philosophical word games.” There is a place for discussion and conversation that deals with absolutes in academia.

We should always look for the door to the gospel or the part of the gospel that is going to resonate with our listeners. We should look for opportunities for transparency. We should try to demonstrate to our peers that we’ll be transparent and honest with them, because I think we all respond to that.

Christianity is not simple. I don’t have all the answers. I struggle sometimes and there’s so much I don’t understand. The question is, are there any answers? Not do I have them, but are there any? In this age, regardless of the evidence you present, people will still question it because of their skepticism. What we’re looking for is a “humble apologetic.”

I’m sometimes asked if what I’m describing is “process evangelism.” I never liked the term “process evangelism” because it seems to imply that it’s a special kind of evangelism. It isn’t; it’s just evangelism. It’s just a matter of how long the process takes. I emphasize this because I don’t want people feeling

that they're doing some strange, variant form of evangelism. In the book of Acts Paul visited synagogues every Sabbath, week after week, reasoning with people. Why did it take so long? Did he have a lack of boldness? No, he simply treated them in a unique way because of their specific needs. He "became all things to all men."

I think this is what generally tends to happen to Christians. No matter where we go, we know what we're supposed to do; we're supposed to share the gospel with people. It's almost like a placard we wear on our heads. So I walk into my graduate school and I see all the pagan graduate students. I immediately think, "How do I bring up he gospel? I don't want to talk about this. I suspect that you're antagonistic, because you're certainly not friendly." I can't figure out how to initiate spiritual topics safely, so I back away.

There's a funny thing that happens when one becomes a Christian; there's an initial social maturing process that takes place, and then sometimes there's a social retardation that follows. Christians are often socially very backward due in part to their "agenda anxiety." If there is no easy way to bring up the Gospel, then we back away from peer contact.

The average non-Christian has a much easier time getting along with his peers than the average Christian because the Christian keeps avoiding contact out of awkwardness, shame, or guilt. He just keeps hoping that someday he'll develop a supernatural boldness, or his non-Christian counterpart will develop a sudden openness to spiritual things.

I want to encourage graduate students to take off their placards for a while and first be human beings—first make a connection. We should be able to say something to any other grad student we meet. "Hey, how are you? Where are you from? You said something in class that blew my socks off. Where did you get that? How did you grow up? How were you raised to think?" But instead, we often say nothing. I think what's happened is that we have polarized. Christian grad students have a little corner where they fellowship together, helping each other to survive the ordeal of graduate school, but not connecting with secular grad students. We think that the only crossing that can be made is on spiritual lines, so often no crossing seems possible. We forget that we can cross over on human lines, simply by being willing to make contact.