

I don't have enough **FAITH**
to be an **ATHEIST**

with Dr. Frank Turek **PODCAST**

How to Help Doubters

(March 4, 2022)

Hey friends. Sean McDowell filling in today for the one and only Dr. Frank Turek. We're here on I Don't Have Enough Faith to Be an Atheist podcast and radio. And my guest today is someone, if you are not familiar with him, you've got to get familiar with him right away. We're going to talk about doubt, deconstruction, and even more importantly, how to have meaningful spiritual conversations with people who see the world differently. Preston Ulmer has started what's called Doubters' Clubs, and he has a fascinating new book I'm gonna hold up here if you can see the video, it's called The Doubters' Club: Good-Faith Conversations with Skeptics, Atheists, and the Spiritually Wounded. And it's basically a roadmap for how Christians can have meaningful spiritual conversations and friendships with non-believers. We're gonna get into that over this entire show, but first off, Preston, thanks so much for joining me on CrossExamined radio and podcast.

Preston:

Oh, it's my pleasure. Thanks for having me on, Sean.

Sean:

Absolutely. Well, before we get into some of the specifics about how to lead these doubters' clubs, I would love to have just our viewers first hear your own personal story to faith.

Preston:

Yeah, well, just like all of our stories, it's a unique journey. I went to Bible college really with not a whole lot of understanding of the Bible. You know, I would know the verses, John 3:16, all those sort of things. I knew the Old Testament and New Testament and I could tell you to stay away from Revelation. It's just a scary book. I mean, those were things I knew. Then I go to Bible college and I had a lot of questions. In fact, I even put it in the book, Sean, but I remember where I was sitting - I know this is unique - I remember where I was sitting on an airplane when I started having these, like, pestering questions about faith, like does God exist? And I was actually just flying back from Arkansas, preaching at a youth event, and I'm having these

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questions. And I know you're thinking, why were you preaching, and you didn't really know the Bible that well. That's a great question too. But I'm flying back and then it just snowballed. And I went and I asked some pastors, well-meaning people that summer: What should I do? And they just gave me really bad advice. They were, you know, sleep on the Bible, and they were, just listen to more worship music.

Sean:

Ok, hang on. I've got cut you off. You literally were given the advice to physically sleep on the Bible?

Preston:

Oh, yeah. Now to take it even further, the person who gave me that advice made shirts with Bible references all over them, and so, to clothe yourself in the Word of God, okay. So, it sounds sweet when your grandma tells you to do that, but when you're in a crisis of faith, it's just useless. So yeah, that was the advice I got. So then, you know, I go back to Bible college, because I just needed to get my associate's degree. I thought, at this point, I just need to get a degree. I don't want to waste the money. And during this time, I just was convinced God didn't exist. I didn't believe in the stuff. And I talked to a few trusted people about it, but even my personality would not be to go tell everyone. But I just thought, you know, keep your head down and just get a degree. And there was a professor of apologetics and philosophy who came to me, and he was talking to me about how my summer was, and I told him it was terrible. You know, I even saw at doctor, Sean.

Sean:

Did you really?

Preston:

Yeah. Because, you know, sometimes your doubts can spiral into depression, if you're not careful and if you don't have people walk alongside you. And I told the doctor, find something, like, find something so you can give me a pill. So, I tell this to the professor. And he tells me this. He says, hey, can I walk with you through your questions?

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Sean:

Wow.

Preston:

And I said, sure. And he said, I don't care where you land, as long as you're honest. I'll never forget that phrase. I don't care where you land as long as you're honest. He believed a few things. He believed I had integrity in my pursuit of truth. He believed that I actually wanted to figure things out. And he wasn't trying to make me think like him. And here's the other thing, he actually believed that God is truth, so the closer I would get to truth, the closer I would get to God. This was something he was convinced of. So, we went on this journey for about, I don't know, six to eight months. And then, that's when I'd say, okay, I'm actually convinced - and to this day, it's the reason I'm a Christian - I'm actually convinced a man named Jesus rose from the dead. And I know for us now, and for the listeners to this, that seems so elementary. It was not. That was revolutionary. I had not even known that a historical account of the resurrection of Jesus was something that I could look into.

Sean:

Preston, who know, I went through a similar period of doubt at Bible college, interestingly enough. And one of the ways my dad responded is to say, son, only reject this if you think it's not true. And there was kind of this confidence in his response. I love you no matter what, and above all else be committed to truth, and I think you'll land on Christianity if you seek truth, because Christianity is true. But I love you no matter what, was his response. And it was exactly what I needed to hear. Now for you, you kind of skipped over that six to eight months. What happened in that season? Were you meeting with him? Were you reading books? Walk us through that process.

Preston:

Yeah, well, what happened actually set the trajectory for how we do doubters' clubs, set the trajectory for how I raise my kids. I mean, it was pivotal. What he did, well, let me say what he didn't do, okay, because I do get a lot of requests sometimes from people - and I just got a text from someone who said, hey, what's a discipleship curriculum I could give to someone with doubts? And you know, you always appreciate the heart behind that but you're like, this is what discipleship is. It's highly relational. So, he didn't give me curriculum. He said, I want you

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to come my office once a week, I want you to ask the question that's on your mind, okay. Nothing's off limits. And you know, he even told me, he said, you're not gonna get kicked out for asking whatever question you need to ask.

Sean:

Great.

Preston:

And so, I'd come to his office, and I would say, here's what I'm wondering. And then he would ask a few more questions to figure out why I picked that question out of all questions to ask. And then he would say, here's what I've found to be true on this, and he talked to me about it. And he'd say: How's that resonate with you? I mean, he's always trying to see, is this landing with me, why or why not? So, Sean, on some of the questions, it was like, I remember going to being like, I don't understand why when I pray, if God's the God of joy and love, if I'm depressed and I'm trying to pray to him - I mean, I didn't believe in God at this time - but I'm like, if he's there and I'm trying to pray to Him, why doesn't he just lift my depression? You know, a lot of these kinds of questions that you'll tackle on your Instagram account, you know, just these questions that just seem to nag us. And he would answer that. Or I would do this, like, hey, my - who's now my wife - I'd say we're having trouble in our relationship, and honestly, I don't want anything to do with Christians. And he'd be like, okay, well, let's talk about that. And that was eight months of one on ones. Now, he ended up doing our wedding. We just talked a few weeks ago.

Sean:

That's amazing.

Preston:

Yeah. So, he sacrificed his time. And he's very knowledgeable. So, he did have books ready and all those things.

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Sean:

So, it's a combination. He was gracious and he knew stuff. It was both. We've probably got about 45 seconds. Looking back, how many of your questions were intellectual versus emotional and relational?

Preston:

Great question. I would say my intellectual questions were based off of what I was experiencing, okay. So, experience for me was the basis. My story was the basis right. So, now I'm looking in the rearview mirror and going, this is crazy. So, that was the launching pad for my intellectual questions. My relational questions came later, Sean, when I knew I could trust my mentor. I wasn't going to show those cards early on.

Sean:

That's really, really interesting. As I look back on my doubting period, there were some emotional hurts, feeling like God was distant, false expectations about God mixed in with questions like: Why is there evil? Are there contradictions in the Bible? So, it's always a combination of the two. Alright, we're here on I Don't Have Enough Faith to Be an Atheist radio and podcast. When we come back, we're going to talk about how you can have practical tools to engage those around you in spiritual conversations. My guest, Preston Ulmer, author of The Doubters' Club, will join us when we're right back.

Alright friends you're back on I Don't Have Enough Faith to Be an Atheist podcast and radio. I am not Dr. Frank Turek. Sean McDowell here filling in for the one and only Dr. Turek. But we've got a special guest today. His name is Preston Ulmer and he's written a fantastic book. I want you to pick up a copy too. It's called The Doubters' Club. And here's why we're doing this. I teach at Biola University, and we do a lot of apologetics training in content. Sometimes we don't always connect that content, and this is true for all of apologetics, to help people live it out in relationships with others.

And Preston Ulmer, these clubs, and this book you've written, practically gives people the tools to do this. You came on my YouTube channel and just rocked it, so when I had a chance to host this I thought, I gotta bring my buddy Preston on, because I want all of Frank's audience and beyond to hear we have to say. So, you've got these doubters' clubs, and we're gonna walk into

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what they look like, the guidelines for them, how to have these spiritual conversations. But first, you have a section in your book on how Jesus approached doubters and seekers. Talk about that, if you will.

Preston:

Yeah, well, you know, in Jesus's day, if you're reading the Bible, you're not going to find atheists, right. You're not going to find that term in the Bible. And so, I think a lot of people go, well, it's just different now and we've just progressed, and those sort of things. What we find is Jesus had this incarnational apologetics to him, okay. So, we know John 1, grace and truth, he comes in grace and truth, but we also find that that truth isn't just in what is said, it's very much in what is done and how people are treated. So, a lot of the people who come to Jesus with objections, actually come with religious objections, which we would say, equal the story of someone. So, even now, when people talk about the objections they have to faith, those are wrapped up in story, which is not bad, it's just how we are as humans. And so, Jesus handles those in a way that's going to be, not just compassionate, but he's going to get to the root of the question.

You have Thomas, whenever he's engaging with Thomas, and here's what I'd say that's so fascinating about that. When we see Jesus is going after both the story, and he's going after the ability to show himself who he is to a doubter, in the resurrected form, he still has scars, right. Like, if I have a resurrected body, one of the first things I'm doing, I'm getting rid of my scars and my moles, okay. But Jesus has scars. He's showing that, hey, here's the heart of God, while you're looking at the doubts that you're dealing with. Right? So, what he tells Thomas is not just to show himself, look, I've raised myself from the dead, I strongly believe, is to show this is the heart of God is to be in relationship with you, not just intellectual assent. So yeah, I do deal with it in the book, and we do find it to be different than being on a YouTube channel and talking to atheists and those sort of things.

However, I think that we find it all throughout the scriptures. We find it in the Old Testament, right? Whenever God renames Jacob into Israel, which is to strive with God - or some commentators say, which I think is a better, more accurate translation - a God wrestler. And then God names a whole nation, the Israelites. These are the ones who have wrestled with God. I mean, there is something about, Sean, when you wrestle with God, you can't do it from

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far away. Like you have kids, I have kids, when my kids wrestle with me, they have to be close to me to do that. And this seems to be a principle in the Old Testament, and in the New Testament, and I find it to be incredibly encouraging in my own walk with God. So yeah, there's a lot of that in the book.

Sean:

I do have one more question for you, for you before we jump into exactly what these doubters' clubs are. How painful is doubt for many people?

Preston:

Well, I'll say this, just by way of story. I was talking to a lady on Sunday, I was at church, and she's walking in and she's talking to me about the book, and she said, you know, I'm revisiting the way that I was taught with God growing up. You know, she's probably in her 50s or 60s now. And I said, that's good, because if you have the same God you had when you were 10, that's a pretty small God, you know, if you haven't grown in your understanding. And she starts crying. She's crying. I mean, we're at the entrance of walking into the auditorium, and her husband's there with her. And she literally said this, Sean, just this last Sunday. She said, I honestly feel like if I progress with God - I'm not talking progressive Christianity. Just progressed in her relationship with God, in how she views him. She said, I feel like I'm gonna get struck by lightning.

Sean:

Oh, my goodness.

Preston:

No. I would, I would say that's extreme, except it just happened a few days ago. Not the struck by lightning, but her feeling that way. So, it is it is painful. It's extremely painful. I think the pain goes up, depending on whether or not you have a community to help you through it. Right? If you're doing this in isolation, it gets more and more painful, because you just don't know where you're going or what you're doing. You've never worked those muscles before. And if you do it in community, and you have people walk alongside you, and they're encouraging you, and they're embracing you, right, they're able to say, keep asking, keep going, those sorts of things,

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I mean, you're probably going to just sleep better at night. So, I think the pain goes up, depending on the level of isolation.

Sean:

Seems like there's almost three levels we could talk about with doubt; those who doubt alone - bad idea that's painful - those who have a supportive community that minimizes but doesn't get rid of that pain, and then those who have a community who don't understand the doubt, who discourage and give the bad advice, like you got, which was well-intended, which exacerbates the pain.

Preston:

Yeah.

Sean:

That seems to me to be at the heart of why you're doing these doubters' clubs, is just ministering to people, where they're at, building friendships with them, and you know, trying to help them along on their journey that all of us hope would end up with Jesus. So, maybe this is a great time to shift into: What is a doubters' club? Tell us about it.

Preston:

Well, the doubters' club is trying to get people to question faith, question certainty, but in community, okay. So, a doubters' club, here's what it is, and then we talk about where it comes from or whatever. But what it is, it's co-moderated by two people. You have a Christian and you have a non-Christian who actually have a friendship, and they're wanting to, not just display their friendship, they're wanting this to become a movement in their community. So, the doubters' clubs typically happen once a month. You know, these are not people employed by the church, these are firemen, these are going to be people that own companies, and they will take the first 15 minutes and they'll go through the doubters' club rules, okay.

So, each co-moderator invites their group of friends, there's some advertisement, not a whole lot, but these groups are about 15 to 20 people. They never take place in a church. We say that this is for the people who are God haters. There are people who are hurt by church. So, you know, they'll take place, coffee shops, micro-breweries, just whatever is going to be a natural

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place for these two friends to hang out, right. So, they have their friend group. It is a very structured meeting. The first 15 minutes they go through the five ground rules. We value respect above being right, we listen without interrupting, we listen with an open mind, we understand and accept differences of opinion, and this is a safe space. Those are the five.

Sean:

Let's come back to some of the particulars. I want to frame for people exactly what this involves and entails. So, this is a movement in which you lead a doubters' club, and other people are leading these clubs around the country, maybe even around the world. Is that essentially what this is?

Preston:

Yeah. So, these clubs, they spread around the world. And we've launched over, I think it's over 83 clubs now in different parts of the world. And what they are is always two people on polar opposite sides of faith and they're saying - here's the vision - we're gonna model friendship and pursue truth with one another. That's the whole deal. And then after they go over the rules, they talk together about what the group voted on the time before, okay. So, if you can picture an unsaved congregation picking the next sermon, it's kind of like that.

Sean:

Ok. So, let's do this. Tell me the story of how you started this doubters' club.

Preston:

Yeah, well, we were going to plant a church in Denver, Colorado, and I didn't know how to find the neighborhood other than to go there and try to pick out a neighborhoods. I went with a few friends, we go to this downtown neighborhood - and we knew we wanted it to be in the urban center of Denver - and we go this downtown neighborhood, I walk in a coffee shop, Sean, and I asked a really dumb question to the coffee shop owner in downtown Denver. I said, hey, what kind of church do you go to? Right? And he just laughed, and he said, I don't go to church, I'm an atheist. And I said, hey, I didn't used to believe all this either. But if you did go to church, what kind of would you go to? I mean, we jumped in the deep end in this conversation real fast.

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Sean:

Yeah.

Preston:

And we went back and forth and this is what he said. He said, I'd go to a place where we can ask questions and we're not judged for thinking differently.

Sean:

Wow.

Preston:

Yeah. So, I'm walking out with my friends who were, you know, there to help me find a neighborhood move our family into. And he [coffee shop owner] says, what's your name? I said, Preston. He said, Preston, are you going to start a church in this neighborhood? And I said, I don't know. And he said, if it's that kind of church, I think that you should.

Sean:

Wow.

Preston:

So, you know, I don't know how you would say God speaks to you but when an atheist coffee shop owner invites us in, it was like, wow, this is kind of the convergence of my education and my experience in this moment. So, then we moved there, months later, and then you fast forward months after that. I've only interacted with this coffee shop owner one time on Facebook, you know, kind of a nice to meet you kind of deal. Yeah, and then I walk in and he sees me. He says, Preston, and I go, yeah, and he said, Did you move here based on what I said?

Sean:

Really?

Preston:

Which, you know, you're like, yes, you and what we felt God told us. I didn't say that. I said, kind of. So, he came and sat down, and I just had this idea that morning, Sean, I had this idea of:

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What if we had something where he and I were modeling friendship and and moving towards truth together asking questions?

Sean:

That's amazing.

Preston:

And I just said: Would you start this with me? We wrote the rules down on a napkin, started three months later, and that's the origin story.

Sean:

Well, that is perfect. When we get back after the break we're going to talk about those rules. And I want to hear about that first meeting. You must have had some serious fears that this thing could go south and not enough the way that it did. So, Sean McDowell filling in today for the great Frank Turek on the I Don't Have Enough Faith to Be an Atheist radio and podcast. After the break will be more with Preston Ulmer, author of The Doubters' Club. We'll see you then.

All right, you're back on I Don't Have Enough Faith to Be an Atheist radio and podcast. Sean McDowell filling in for the one and only Dr. Frank Turek. We're talking to Preston Ulmer who's written a fascinating book called The Doubters' Club. And before the break we started talking about how these clubs began. Now in just a moment, we're going to shift and start talking about the very first meeting. I can only imagine, Preston, you were just worried about what was going to happen in this meeting.

But first off, before we get to that, one of the things I've done with CrossExamined with Frank is multiple online classes, and they have a new class coming out by Alisa Childers on progressive Christianity. She has written a book on this and is one of the experts. It's a six-week course where she's got some great content that's there, and also, zooming sessions together with those who sign up. All you got to do is go to [CrossExamined.org](https://www.CrossExamined.org) and click on the online courses to learn more and sign up. This is a class I am tempted to sign up myself and take because I get so many questions about progressive Christianity, and I know you do too, Preston.

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Well, let's jump back to your experience. You were talking about setting up these doubters' clubs, where you and an atheist that you met in Denver, just decide to kind of get together and talk about things in friendship, genuinely. It's not a church. Take me to that first meeting. I wonder if you told your wife like I might have done something I'm going to regret. I don't know how this is going to happen. Tell us about that first meeting when you actually did it.

Preston:

Well, you know, when we had the idea together, I was like, this is gonna be so fun. And then driving to that first meeting you're like: What did I do? I think I was on, for sure, my parent's prayer list. You know everybody is like, what is going on? I walk in and, Sean, I could just tell you, it's like when you see the people there and you start engaging with them, you just start having fun. So yes, I was nervous, but when I saw them and started interacting - now, that first meeting was small, seven or eight people, okay. Obviously, I knew my friend who was co-moderating, and I knew one other person, but when you start interacting with them, and then we made circles with the chairs, you know, and we're sitting down, we didn't think that this was going to become a global movement. It was just, let's do this. Let's build bridges where there's barriers type deal. And then we started talking. Well, of course, we didn't have a topic yet. Because usually, you know, it's the topic you vote on the time before, but there was no time before.

So, we just said: Why do you think the way you think? Because, you know, sometimes atheists will say, I don't believe. So, to say, why do you believe the way you believe?, would just be offensive for no reason to them. But we just said: Why do you think the way you think? And it started opening up stories. And I realized, time flew by so fast. Afterwards, it was like, well, who wants to go grab something to eat after this? I mean, it was like, we immediately learned stories. Then we started doing it every week after the first one.

Sean:

Oh, wow.

Preston:

We're like, let's do this again. And then it started to grow and then we had to put structure to momentum and all that. But that first meeting was so intriguing, because I realized, I just heard

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the stories of seven people, majority of who don't trust Jesus but are willing to have conversations about him. And that was, for me, it kind of shifted from, yes, I want to be knowledgeable, I believe in apologetics, I want to have those tools, but I don't want to use it like - this what I learned after the first meeting - I don't want to use it like Rambo blowing people away, right. I want it to be like a machete clearing a path and going, hey, follow me, this seems to be the best path forward. That first meeting helped change my mind from Rambo to, I don't know, the guy from Uncharted, that movie that just came out. So, that was really helpful for me.

Sean:

So, how did you get people to this first meeting? Did you just call people, put stuff on social media? How did you get those first seven or eight people that were there?

Preston:

Well, I didn't really want to advertise it on Facebook, because you never know, you know, Christians will sometimes be like, yes, we're going to this thing and then you get like 30 Christians and five non-believers.

Sean:

That's true.

Preston:

Yeah, what we did was we just said, Why don't you invite your friend group, I'll invite my friend group? That was meeting one. And then they invited their friends and then we started having posters. So, I think the next meeting was about evil. God allowing evil. And so, then we made posters, and we started doing that, and then we would just put those around in the coffee shop.

Sean:

Well, if you had seven the first time, that means you brought three friends. Next time you do it, let me know, and you'll at least have four. So, sorry, I couldn't resist. I knew you could take it too. The structure of these meetings, it sounds like the first 15 minutes, two people talk

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together on a pre-determined topic that everybody voted on, and everybody else listens in. Is that the first segment of the meeting?

Preston:

Yep. So, from when people walk in, Sean, people will come in and we just say, okay, get whatever you want to drink, it's on the doubters' club. Okay. So, when we launch a meeting, we do tether them to a local church, local faith community that sponsors them, but that doesn't need to be known. They don't need anything to be branded. They're paying for the beverages, or the pastries, or whatever. So, they come in and we say, hey, get whatever you want, find a seat, and then we say, let's get started. And we go, we're gonna go over a few rules. We have them on a chalkboard, just to keep it kind of minimal, and then we just go back and forth on the rules, one by one. We're laughing together, we're having fun. You know, maybe we're pointing out one of the rules is, we don't interrupt and then he'll be like, alright, Preston, just remember that rule. You know, we're just playful. Again, we got a model friendship.

And then after that, we say, okay, what you voted on last time was: Is God a moral monster?, which was actually one that was voted on, or Black Lives Matter movement, whatever it would be, that's what you voted on last time. And then I'll turn to my friend, and as the Christian co-moderator I'll say: Would you introduce yourself and would you just talk a little bit about that? And then let's just model this for 15 minutes and then open it up for conversation. And then we go back and forth, and we're asking serious questions, and there are challenges happening, but it's in the boundaries of friendship.

And then we say to the group, what do you think on this issue? How have you developed your thoughts around this issue? And then I always ask permission. Hey, can I ask you a question about that? And a lot of times, Christianity is on the hot seat. You know, people will just be like, well, I disagree with you, Preston. And I'll say, hey, I've disagreed with myself too. What do you disagree with me on? You know, those sort of things. And then at the end, we say: What would you like to talk about next time? We write it down; we allow them to vote. I even tell them this, I say, you can vote twice, okay. And if you're doubling down, and you raise your hands like this, and you're an atheist in the room, I know you're not praising God, you're just voting twice. And then we just move on. We don't open with prayer; we don't close with prayer. This is for the people that are not going to walk into a church building.

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Sean:

Now, you mentioned like, Is God a moral monster, the problem of evil. Of course, black lives matter could be the phrase that people use, or it could be the movement in the sense of the organization that's a little bit more political. Do you talk about political issues or intentionally leave those off the table?

Preston:

So, for the sake of the doubters' club - and we've even told people this in the training - they're not allowed to filter issues. So, anything that's voted on is fair game. Okay? If majority rules, if the majority of the people in the club say, if that day, you know, there's 15 people and 10 of them are voting on that topic, that's the topic you got to wrestle with. So, you better believe 2020, once we were safe enough to meet after Covid, oh, it was hot. It was hard.

Sean:

I can only imagine. Now, for me, I try to host on my YouTube channel a lot of conversations with people who are atheists and who have very different worldviews. And one thing I found is that the success of a conversation, a lot of it is determined based on who I invite, before they even show up. There are some guests I have I'm like, it's just not going to work to have a conversation with this person. Maybe they're a little bit more combative, they want to debate for whatever reason. Is that true with these conversations? And what do you do when somebody becomes a little bit more combative than you're hoping to experience in these clubs?

Preston:

Well, we try to tell the pioneers - that's what we call them, the co-moderators. Which we do have both atheists and Christians who go through our training, which is really interesting that atheists are saying, I want Christian friends that will help me journey together. So, when it comes to people in the club, comes to the co-moderators, try to meet, like a day before or that day, maybe for breakfast or lunch, meet together and talk with each other. I know life's busy but try to do that. I remember, we were going to be talking on the topic of hell one time, and the atheist co-moderator, my friend - I'm sitting with my wife, he's with his girlfriend, we're having sushi together about to go the club - and he said, let me ask you, do you think I'm going to hell? And I got pretty emotional. Not angry. Sad. And I said, you know what, I would ask you

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not to ask that in front of the group because I care about you too much to just give an answer, but I will talk to you about that here. So, I talked about it there. But it allows you to, again, be friends. So, that's the advice we tell the co-moderators, have this discussion before to some degree.

And then when it comes to the people in the group, we have the rules for a reason. It's not just an icebreaker. We'll tell them, hey, you're breaking rule number four, you know. And so, to date, I've only had to kick out two people. Both were Christians, which is unfortunate. When I say kick out...asked to leave, right. Like, hey, this doesn't seem to be the best environment for what you're looking for. And I don't know about the other clubs, I haven't asked them, but I can ask them next time I see them and let you know. But the rules are so helpful.

Sean:

I'd be real interested to hear. So, it sounds like just you're setting the example for the first 15 minutes, so people see what's expected. Lay out the rules every single meeting. Is that right? Like you walk through all five rules every single meeting?

Preston:

Every meeting.

Sean:

Okay. And then once you frame it that way, the vast majority of people kind of fall in line and engage in these conversations well. Is that really essentially the way it tends to work?

Preston:

Yes. Yeah. And again, if you're modeling it well, people will follow where you're leading them, so that's crucial.

Sean:

That's perfect. When we get back let's start walking through some of these rules and the particulars of how you facilitate these conversations with non-believers. And you talk about as thorny issues, racial relations, problem of evil, contradictions in the Bible, and do it well. Sean McDowell filling in for the great Frank Turek on the I Don't Have Enough Faith to Be an Atheist

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radio and podcast here with Preston Ulmer, author of *The Doubters' Club*. And when we get back we're gonna walk through some particulars for you.

Alright, friends, welcome to the *I Don't Have Enough Faith to Be and Atheist* radio and podcast. Sean McDowell filling in for the one and only Dr. Frank Turek. And my guest today is Preston Ulmer, who has written a fascinating book I want all of you to pick up called *The Doubters' Club*. We've been talking about these very practical clubs that he's put together, based on friendships between a Christian and a non-believer, to just talk about some of the toughest issues of the day in relationship. So, Preston, I'm curious: Is this discipleship? Is this evangelism? Or is this something else? How does this fit in with a broader church ministry?

Preston:

Yeah. How does this fit in with the mission, right? I write about this in the book, but I think, and I make the case for it, I think that discipleship starts pre-conversion. Okay. So, this would be part of discipleship. In fact, you know, one of the ways that I talk about it is: When were the disciples Christians? When did they have this spirit of God within them, believing in the resurrected Christ? Well, that would be after the resurrection. So, the question then is: What was Jesus doing for those first three years? And I would say, discipleship. And I know there's a lot of nuances within that argument. But what I'm saying is, I think discipleship starts pre-conversion and if there's someone who is moving towards God at a different pace, or even towards the knowledge of God at a different pace, then that in and of itself is intentional discipleship. Evangelism is within that spectrum, okay, but I don't think that it's evangelize and then you start the discipleship journey. I think the discipleship journey encompasses the negative side of the scale all the way through the positive side of the scale. If zero is salvation in Jesus, then that would be the evangelism piece. So, this is pre-conversion discipleship.

Sean:

Now, I imagine some people listening are saying great, maybe some non-believers will be exposed to loving, thoughtful Christians, and reconsider or consider the Christian faith. But [unintelligible], there's some Christians that will meet some very thoughtful, gracious, compelling atheists, and maybe plant seeds of doubt. And we have this movement of deconstruction right now. Does that concern you and how do you respond to it?

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Preston:

Well, the reality is, if those Christians are only engaging with non-Christians at the doubters' club, then they're really living in a bubble, aren't they? If these questions are only coming up in a doubters' club setting, those Christians probably, to be honest with you, Sean, are what I would say certainty seeking Christians. They're certain about what they believe, they've drawn a line in the sand, and they're there to convert people. Now, I don't say that in a demeaning way. I just want to be descriptive, okay. So, they're there for that reason. I'm not actually concerned about them. I would be concerned about do they know their neighbor's name, but as far as their commitment to faith, not so much. Then you have the other type of people where, like, launching doubters' clubs in high schools, which we've done. So, you have high schoolers that, whenever I was training our first person to launch in a high school in New Orleans, I said to her parents who are pastors, I said, you know, this our first time doing this. I'm a little nervous that I don't want her to get sidetracked from her faith.

Sean:

Yeah.

Preston:

And this is what she told me - not her parents - she said, Preston, I'm already having these conversations...

Sean:

Wow.

Preston:

...I'm just asking you to give me the tools to help other people have them well. And that was an eye opener. So, on one hand, you have the certainty seeking Christian that you're like, you know, then you work on loving people and having these conversations more regularly. This will help them. On the other hand, you have people that they're having them all the time. What they want is to have them in a structured way, where the gospel is presented as a Jesus looking gospel. And so, I'm not really concerned, because out of those two camps, I feel like it's gonna be a win for the Christian.

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Sean:

You know, it shows a lot of confidence in truth, and the truth of Christianity, to be able to have these conversations. And it's the Christians who should be leading them. I was leading, about a month ago, a conversation at my church on how to have spiritual conversations, and I told a dentist in my church about this. He goes, whoa, I'm going to contact Preston. I want to do this. These are practical tools that people in the church can take to start engaging their non-believing friends. Now, in the book - again, your book is called The Doubters' Club. I think it's so good, Preston, and just want to give a plug for it every chance I got, because I want to see people start these clubs and engage their neighbors. You walk through five ground rules. Now obviously, we wouldn't have time to give the depth that you do in your book, but maybe just kind of mention what they are and just explain them briefly.

Preston:

Sure. So, the first one is: We value respect above being right. So, this is going to be, you know, basically, we do think that there is truth, but respect is the name of the game in the doubters' club. Okay. So, that's rule number one.

Number two: We listen without interrupting. This is why we encourage people, don't start doubters' clubs on Facebook groups, and those sort of things. It needs to be in person. You've got to be able to see someone and how they're interacting. We listen without interrupting.

Number three: We listen with an open mind. Now, I will say this, we're not saying we have such an open mind that our brains fall out, okay. That's not what we're saying. We're saying, we listen with a possibility that we may be wrong. I mean, if I expect that of my non-Christian friends, to have that posture, I have to have the same posture. And cognitive mirroring would say, I should probably lead the way on that. So, that would be, we listen with open mind.

Number four: We understand and accept differences of opinions. Notice, we didn't say differences of truth because we're after truth, that's what we're going for. But differences of opinions, we can understand except that, right? And that's where people's story comes into play.

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And the last one, number five: This is a safe place. If at any point, you know, if someone feels unsafe, we need to bring correction to that. So, that's where in the training I try to tell people, you should hold ground for the skeptic and the doubter as much as possible, as much as possible.

Sean:

Tell me what you mean by safe, because I think safe oftentimes means my ideas won't be challenged, I won't be pressed to rethink things. That's often what safe means in the college campus. I suspect you mean something different by it.

Preston:

Yeah, safe means that you as a person won't be attacked, you won't be insulted because of your story. And you're not going to be pressured to speak up if you want to listen. So, safe is going to be, you can sit there and have coffee, you can speak up, but the minute that you start challenging the integrity of another person, not just their idea, it becomes an unsafe place. So, that's what we mean by safe.

Sean:

Good, good clarification. Because I know ideas matter and we want to challenge ideas but doing it in a way not to win an argument or to shame somebody, but to mutually arrive at truth, I think is great. That's such a wonderful way. Now I imagine having all these conversations leading this movement, that you've probably learned a few things about atheists and how atheists view Christians, had your own mind changed on some things. Maybe give us an example or two that come to mind.

Preston:

Yeah, well, I've learned that atheists see that it's hard for Christians to gather without the motive of converting, okay, so it's hard to even have an atheist over for Thanksgiving dinner. This would be what the perspective is, right...

Sean:

Sure.

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Preston:

...that they would say even going over to dinner is going to be like, so, how are you doing with the Lord? You know, those sorts of things. And I've learned that, and I've realized, we have to be able to be in the same space, and even create gatherings, where we're not always trying to convert people. We've got to be able to do that. So, when Jesus is a friend of sinners, he's not just friendly to them, he's a friend of them. He was gathered with them so much, he was associated with them, you know, the glutton and the drunkard. And so, I realized that pretty early on. That was something that was interesting to me. I also realized Christians don't listen well, from this side of the atheist. The number of times, Sean, that someone has said, no Christian has listened to my story, is like mind blowing. And I know, you know, this YouTube channel, and what you do, I know, it's like: How are we not listening? But if we want to gain trust, right - this is in a book called Conversational Intelligence - if we want to gain trust from resistor to co-creating answers in someone's brain, we have to listen. It's actually the Highway of trust. And when someone says, nobody's listened, you're like, oh.

And then here's the other thing. I've learned that, you know, in the church world, we're sitting here going, pray for the prodigal to come home, and I do, right, I do. But there's a lot of times where the prodigal is going, how would I even come home if I wanted to? Like, what does that step look like without experiencing shame and condemnation? What does that step look like without having to become the type of evangelical Christian that my parents are? So, those are things that I've learned that been pretty eye opening.

Sean:

The Bible has a lot to say about listening and we as Christians don't do it well. I have a lot of conversations like this on air and off air and hear the same things like, this the first time a Christian is just listened. And that shouldn't be the case. Now who can start these clubs and how would they do it?

Preston:

Yeah, well, anyone can start them with this caveat, okay. Let's go back to when you ask the discipleship question. If we're thinking of a number scale, if zero is salvation and positive ten is fully surrendered life, you have to be okay with your goal being on the negative side of the scale. If all you see a spiritual curiosity, if all you see is someone reconsidering, you just gotta be

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okay with it. We don't baptize people in the doubters' club. Now we've had people from the doubters' club get baptized and follow Jesus, of course. So, that's the caveat. Anyone can start it if they have this mentality, I want to grow by engaging with people not like me.

Sean:

Quickly tell us where they can start them and also follow you.

Preston:

Yeah, they can go to TheDoubtersClub.com. They can just click on Get Started and it goes straight to us. It's a link that they fill out their information. It goes straight to our team, and we'll engage with them. And if they want to email, they can email me at Preston@TheDoubtersClub.com.

Sean:

Go to TheDoubtersClub.com, and while you're at it, pick up a copy of the book, The Doubters' Club, if you want to learn how to put your apologetics training into practice, which I know Frank and his team deeply cares about. Preston, thanks so much for coming on. This is Sean McDowell filling in for Frank Turek on I Don't Have Enough Faith to Be an Atheist radio and podcast. God bless.

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