

Five Thresholds Of Postmodern Conversion

Observations from IVCF evangelism at UCLA 8/98

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INTRO: In my nine years of staff work at UCLA, I have found that effective and fruitful incarnational/ relational evangelism to postmoderns is very difficult and elusive. In fact, next to Racial Reconciliation, it has been the single most elusive and frustrating part of staff work for me until God gave us some breakthroughs starting in 1997. These are some of the questions which have haunted me (and which I now have some sense of conviction about):

- What are the blocks that postmoderns have to the gospel? How do we overcome them?
- How can we put together an effective philosophy of evangelism which works for postmoderns?
- At what point in the process of conversion are incarnational, evangelistic structures most effective in helping postmoderns become open to Jesus? What is the relationship between ministering relationally and structurally to postmoderns?
- What are the steps that postmoderns go through in the process of coming into the Kingdom? Can we identify some common phases that they go through so that we will better be able to minister to them and intentionally gear our structures toward best serving their conversions?

As I share about our experience at UCLA, my hypothesis is that there are some transferable, universal postmodern truths that we have stumbled upon. Therefore, I will proceed here with the (possibly wrong) presupposition that the process of conversion that we have seen is indeed universal to postmoderns. Please forgive the air of over-confidence which this write-up will inevitably carry. In contrast to that, I need feedback, so please give me your responses as to where your experience confirms or challenges these ideas. (Please e-mail me at DSchaupp@aol.com)

5 THRESHOLDS: In the 1997-98 school year, we helped 37 non-Christians make decisions to become followers of Jesus. At the end of the year, we interviewed most of the 37 students to find out what kind of internal and external dynamics helped them into the Kingdom of God. What we found was that they actually all went through the same phases of growth and transformation, though each student obviously took different amounts of time to grow from one place to the next. Also, God used very unique and different experiences and issues for each student to help her/him from each threshold to the next.

In a nut shell, here are the 5 thresholds that the postmoderns had to go through on their way toward the Kingdom.

- 1) Grow to trust a Christian or our incarnational evangelism structure, The Edge
- 2) Become curious about God/Jesus/Christianity/Meaning of Life
- 3) Become consciously open to changing their mind about life and God. Willing to verbalize a felt need for something else.
- 4) Begin to consciously seek for God.
- 5) Cross the line and become a follower of Jesus.

Let me address each one of these thresholds one at a time, along with the significant issues for people at each phase of the journey.

I TRUST: This may sound weird, but the process of a non-Christian coming to trust a Christian tends to be a quite fragile and sometimes a very difficult ordeal. Needless to say, we followers of Jesus can never presume that postmoderns trust us once they realize we are Christians. Instead, as we build friendships with them, we must humbly realize that the burden is on us to build trust with them and prove to them that we are different from all of their negative views of Christians. (Even for those few who have never had a negative personal experience with a Christian, they often still have picked up a negative impression from TV evangelists, or the Christian Coalition, or something.) It is fashionable these days on campus to scorn the church and Christianity because of our historical sins and because of our perceived narrow-mindedness. In my opinion, this propensity to give us a bad rap is both something we deserve because we have largely failed at discipleship in the U.S. (i.e. we really don't live out the Sermon on the Mount), and it also is overly harsh and unfairly judgmental of us. But, alas, that is our current context.

How do we build this trust? First and foremost, we build a friendship with them that is authentic, warm, accepting, and real. We get into their world with them and do what they like to do (drawing the line, obviously, at sin). We serve

them, we are generous with them (Luke 16:9), and we just have fun with them, all the while praying for them behind the scenes. Then trust will be formed between the Christian and the non-Christian, though it may take anywhere from one day to a whole year, depending on how much distrust the non-Christian is carrying. (For the few postmodern non-Christians who come in with a positive view of Christians, they have obviously already crossed this Threshold #1.) Once the trust is established, it is a good time to invite them to the incarnational evangelistic event (for us The Edge). In our experience, because The Edge is not a “Seeker Event” but more geared for Skeptics and Cynics, it is the ideal next step once the non-Christian crosses this first threshold and chooses to trust the Christian. Also, this is a good time to invite the non-Christian to an Investigative Bible Discussion (IBD) which is tailored specifically just for non-Christians. They may or may not attend, but at least a basic amount of trust has been established and an invitation is possible. [If we don’t have a specific campus event for non-Christians at this early point in the process, what are we expecting our students to do with these friends?]

In our experience, there is immense benefit to having a trustworthy, incarnational structure in place for our students to immediately utilize once this threshold of trust is realized. In the past, we expected the students to first build the trust, and then to do all the additional hard work of evangelism, including stirring up interest in Jesus, answering tough questions, presenting a compelling version of the gospel, etc. Now we see that it is very hard work for our Christian students to just effectively build this initial level of relational trust and help their friends cross this first threshold. So we want to serve them and their friends by giving them a relevant structure to help the process.

[Two asides: 1) Trust within a relationship is a very dynamic thing, so I am not trying to imply that once I have crossed this “trust line” with a non-Christian, they will magically trust me in everything. But I am saying that there is some line of basic trust which they will need to cross before evangelism can effectively happen.

2) Some people are much better than others at building this feeling of interpersonal trust and helping to put non-Christians at ease. Some can do it in 10 minutes. Most can’t. But even if it takes them months, it IS possible for each of our students to get their friends to threshold #1. So it is my job as a staff worker is to both equip and motivate 100% of my students to bond with and build trust with several non-Christians, and also to have a quality event available for them to be able to invite that friend to. I don’t want to leave them hanging at threshold #1, which is what I used to do.]

II CURIOSITY: How does a student go from trusting me in some basic way to then becoming curious about Jesus? In some cases, they are ready to cross this threshold immediately in our relationship because God has already gotten them to this place of curiosity. However, more likely, this will take some time. Ultimately, only God can make the human heart interested in him. Yet there are some key, practical things that the Christian can do at this point to help the process along.

- Live out the Word: If we can show them the Kingdom lived out in some concrete and practical way, Jesus can become much more real and compelling for them. For example, we take them with us when we care for the homeless. Then they see love in action, and they are intrigued. There is absolutely no substitute for the power of living out the Word with integrity.
- Vulnerability: Being transparent with our struggles, and sharing how Jesus comes through for us as we turn to him is very significant for them in becoming curious.
- Community: Maybe our best “tool” for creating curiosity is true Christian community itself lived out in front of them: real love for each other, forgiveness and reconciliation, sharing all things in common, etc.
- Stimulate curiosity: Good question asking, turning conversations toward spiritual topics, and telling stories about God being at work in our lives all are excellent for spurring on curiosity at this phase.

Once they cross this threshold, they still may need a very safe, non-Christian oriented event in which they can safely express their curiosity. Few curious non-Christians are willing to work up the courage to make the major jump all the way into our “seeker sensitive” Christian small group bible studies. At this phase, we must not mistake them for being a seeker. At this point, they are merely curious. For us, the Edge and our IBDs are the ideal safe place for people to express their curiosity, yet remain unthreatened by Christian culture which dominates our regular chapter events. At the phase of curiosity, most students are willing to admit that they don’t have it all together. Maybe they will even be vulnerable with us and share some real problems. However, being vulnerable is often more of a sign of trust in a relationship than it is genuine openness to change. In our experience, this next threshold is by far the biggest, toughest one for non-Christians to cross. (For example, we estimate that 200 non-Christians were curious about God and had good relationships with us, i.e. they crossed Threshold II. Yet only around 60 of those 200 proceeded on to genuine openness to change.)

There are so many internal and external pressures, fears, and blocks that non-Christians have to overcome in order to turn their curiosity into real seeking. The biggest block is transitioning from merely admitting that they don't have it all together, to indeed doing something about that realization. It is so hard for them to take that next, terrifying step into the unknown and declare to themselves, to others, and to God that they are open to changing the way they see the world and God.

III OPENNESS: Sometimes this process happens rather naturally. At first, they express their curiosity through asking us questions about God and religion. Then somehow their questions become more genuine, and before they know it, they really want good and satisfying answers. But in our experience, for every one student who naturally transitioned from being curious to being open, there were 10 students who never got beyond being curious. They would come to our IBDs for a couple months, they would enjoy the Edge, and they would even ask a few questions. But then their curiosity would wane, and they would become numb and indifferent again. They grew tired of talking about religion, and slowly withdrew from the relationship with the Christian. What do we do with these folks who are stuck in threshold II and are blocked from III?

This is where things get tricky and sophisticated. This is the place for gentle confrontation, for nudging our friend and helping them see that not all is well with their thinking or their lifestyle choices. This is where the skilled evangelist can effectively deconstruct their world view, and gently help create a felt need to get open. In our experience, this is where satisfying answers to hard questions make all the difference. Good, postmodern apologetics are crucial here. Also, it is a good time to speak the truth in love, and raise strategic issues in order to help them feel their need for change and God. I enjoy nudging them with: "You know that God is real, and you even admit that he seems to be initiating with you. Yet you resolutely refuse to respond to him with even a basic acknowledgment of 'All right God. Now don't make me a Christian, but I have to admit that I am open to you'. What is keeping you from taking the reasonable next step of becoming open? What is blocking you from declaring yourself 'open'?" I can play the important role at this point of interpreting for them how God is at work in their life through various circumstances that they share with me. Also, I ask if I can pray for them right there, so God can help them become open. ("Being open" is a generationally accepted value, so they are intellectually predisposed to seeing the crossing of this threshold as a good, healthy thing.) We don't need to be in a rush to press them into the Kingdom, but we can gently press them here to become open. Once they are in this phase, they will not feel like we are being pushy. Back at Threshold I, pushiness would probably be taken the wrong way. But here it is the most loving and appropriate thing for us to do.

(As an aside, in '98-99 we at UCLA are going to focus a lot of our energy and training right here in helping our students become better at helping their friends from threshold II to III. This is our major weakness, and we are not sure how to help our students grow in this tough stuff.)

IV SEEKING: Once they are open, we can help them not only stay open but also become more and more open. Now we can encourage them to themselves pray and intentionally try to connect with God for the first time. We can pastor them and share more directly how Jesus comes through for us in similar circumstances. We can invite them to conferences or retreats where they can hear about Jesus and his Kingdom. Now that they are open we can even pop the question on them about crossing the line. Once they are open, they should become more self-aware. They should reflect more on the general state of their life. They might even come to their first Large Group meeting. We found that this is often the time when they would become open to hanging out with our InterVarsity friends in our social settings. (In the past, this phase is where we tended to target our evangelistic efforts.)

Then they crossed this fourth threshold, and they actually, consciously started to seek after God. They began their search. The difference between this threshold and just "being open" is significant. "Being open" is more of a passive state. It is the decision to quit resisting God and Christianity, the willingness to lay down cynicism and antagonism. This next step of actually looking for God is a whole other decision of intentionality. For some, once they became genuine seekers, it still took them six months of exploring before they were willing to cross into the Kingdom. For others, they really only were "seekers" for a month or less. Once they were intentionally looking, they found the Great Pearl quite quickly. For these seekers, the fact that we have "seeker-sensitive" Large Group meetings and other structures is a real blessing. (For example, 10 of our conversions this year came in part through seekers joining our manuscript study of the Gospel of Mark. For these 10, having a "seeker sensitive" structure was indispensable in their conversion. But at their point of joining our Mark Study, they had already crossed this 4th threshold internally. Interestingly, even for these 10, their first introduction to InterVarsity Fall Quarter was the Edge, which hit them right where they were at.)

V CROSSING THE LINE: I used to be a major proponent of “process conversions”, of just letting people ease across the line at their leisure. But now I have realized that the truly open-ended, pressure-free process is most needed around threshold 2 and 3, not here at the Line. Letting people just slide across the line sounded very Post-modern sensitive, but actually we kept people from knowing there was even a line to cross. Appropriate focus on the line is now key for us helping non-Christians not only transition into the Kingdom, but also make the crucial transition into being a full member of our chapter. They need to know that a decision does need to be made at some point, and when they do make that decision, they will need Christian Community. It is here as they are considering crossing the line that we directly challenge their relativism and their sin. We help them count the costs, and get open to the notion of Lordship: “If and when you decide to become a follower of Jesus, you will need to let Jesus have a say in all areas of your life, and you will need to take his advice.” This is also a great place for them to see and experience how much they have to offer us Christians. We need to treat them like peers and let them meet some need in our life.

At UCLA, 14 of our conversions came at conferences which had a time geared toward helping people across the line. Six came through IBD’s, and 17 came through one-on-one relational follow-up from their friends who invited them into the Kingdom personally. In other words, no one structure or event was the key to our actually getting people across the line, though our training our students to help their friends across the line certainly did pay off.

Wrap-up:

- How do we expect our students to help their friends from one threshold to the next if we don’t help by adding structures/events along the way to serve them in this process? •What happens if we only offer a “Seeker Meeting” which their friends will only want to attend once they are at the 4th threshold?
- What about all those non-Christians God sent us who got stuck at Threshold II?

ADDENDUM:

COMMONLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT “THE EDGE”

For us at UCLA, our monthly Edge event is central both to our philosophy of evangelism and to our fruit in the past two years. Because the Edge is very unconventional, I have been asked a lot of questions about it. I hope you don’t mind if I try to address some of those questions here to possibly address any you might have.

1) “How is the Edge different from a Willow Creek style ‘Seeker Service’?”

If you came to visit the Edge, it would feel very different from a Seeker Service all the way through. The biggest difference is that we are not trying to reach “Seekers”. We believe that our old “Seeker-Sensitive” chapter activities were pretty effective at drawing in seekers. Instead we are going after the cynics, the skeptics, the atheists, and the people who couldn’t care less about God. Because we have tried to get into the non-Christian world as deeply as possible, we have to honor them and play by different rules: 1) The music: our band plays only non-Christian songs, because our goal is to make the non-Christians surprised by how comfortable they feel. 2) The language: when we get into talking about Jesus and the Kingdom of God, we avoid using most of our normal Christian words so that they will know what we are talking about. 3) The call: although we never call for conversion right there at the Edge (we do that in IBD’s), we do call for “spiritual growth” and “openness to God” and things like that. So it is a very challenging environment, yet the non-Christians never feel like they have been challenged. 4) Relativism: the transitions from superficial topics to God and the Gospel are incredibly sensitive. We spend a lot of time working to hide the fact that we are indeed going deeper with people. If we don’t hide the transitions, the audience dis-engages and we lose whatever trust we have built at the event. 5) Vulnerability: the most effective way to help build trust and to make the Gospel real is by sharing real life struggles. There is much more vulnerability at the Edge than at a Seeker Service.

2) “Why is a regular ‘on-ramp’ needed? Can’t a chapter do good evangelism without a regular ‘on-ramp’?”

We used to use our Fall Conference and our year-end Chapter Camp as our two major “on-ramps” or harvesting structures. And God used them to bring 3-6 people into his Kingdom each time. In other words, for the few who happened to be open right then, it was effective. However, non-Christians seldom ripen according to our schedule. If we have 1 or 2 on-ramps for them, we will probably miss most of them. In our experience, the average non-Christian needs about 1 year to slowly warm up to Jesus and to our community before they are ready to jump in. The more opportunities we offer them to check out Jesus at their own pace, the more they feel able to take their spiritual growth at their own pace.

For the campuses who don’t offer many on-ramps, I wonder how many non-Christians are actually not being served who could be?

3) “Is deep discipling and leadership development still possible with doing the Edge?”

One of my biggest heroes of the faith is John Wesley because of how he handled follow up after people converted. He wasn't the best preacher of his day. His good friend, Whitfield, was better. But when Whitfield neared the end of his life, he compared his ministry with Wesley's and said, "My ministry is like a rope of sand, falling through my hands." On the flip side, when Wesley died, he had 70,000 converts who were now committed disciples and powerful leaders. What did Wesley do right? He was adamant that there would be no "still-born babies" after his preaching. In other words, he would not preach where there was not a commitment to excellent follow-up.

For us, the follow-up, discipling, and leadership development are still by far the most important things that God has called us to do. Our discipling and commitment to Lordship has not changed at all. In fact, I think that the caliber of disciple that we are graduating has improved significantly in the past two years BECAUSE of our commitment to the Edge and evangelism. Once our converts come into the Kingdom, we make sure that they get into a small group for pastoring and accountability, and then we give them 4 years of in-depth manuscript study in Mark and other books. I suspect that in a few years, the majority of people that we will be bringing on staff will have converted through the Edge and our outreach ministry.

In summary, if we cannot disciple and guide our new converts into a profound, life-long commitment to Jesus' Lordship in their lives, then nothing we are doing is worth anything.

4) "What point does a chapter need to be at in order to launch something like the Edge? How many leaders do you need to have?"

The core of the chapter need to have some motivation for evangelism and for seeing their friends come to know Jesus. Also, there needs to be a previous conviction that relationships are the key to evangelism, not a structure. The Edge does not do our work for us. It is only a helpful tool. Each student needs to pray, and invite their friends, and do the follow-up. It would be a fiasco if they thought that the structure of the Edge held the power to change lives. Before launching something like the Edge, there needs to be a solid foundation of teaching on evangelism.

Having said that, I think that we staff tend to wait far too long to really lead our chapters into daring experiments for the sake of the gospel. We wait for someone else to tell us what to do, instead of listening to God's Spirit prompting us to "foolishly" try new things to bring "Good news" to this generation that desperately needs good news. If we started working right now, many of our chapters would be very ready to launch something like the Edge in the fall of '99.

For example, last year at the University of Oregon, the InterVarsity chapter was quite small (about 40 students) and quite inexperienced at evangelism. The staff taught all year on evangelism, and then in a daring move, decided to experiment one time with the Edge. They invited me up to speak and help them launch it. But then they ran into complications, fears, and blocks. Kim Porter called me two weeks before the event to say they were canceling it. I responded, "I'm happy to not come up. But are you canceling it because you and your leaders honestly can't pull it off, or because you are blocked by fears and other things?" It turned out that the students were just scared. Kim decided to take a risk on behalf of her chapter, and she kept the event going. The students invited their prayed and invited their friends: 70 students came to their event, 35 of them non-Christians! An IBD sprung out of it, and at least one conversion. Because they were a smaller chapter, they couldn't put together a band. But the drama still worked great, and the non-Christians were really surprised how much they liked it.

From that experience, I think that any chapter of 40 students can launch a monthly event, as long as the core are generally on board with evangelism. Also, you need about 10 students who are willing to help with publicity, refreshments, and drama. Even at a small school, I think it would still work just fine.

5) "What kind of speaking gifts do the staff need to have to speak at an Edge?"

At NISSET '98, we did a course on creating your own Edge-type event. We broke into groups of 5, and each group had to create their own event from scratch, and then present it to the rest of us. That means each group had a speaker who gave us a shortened, 15 minute evangelistic sharing. Each new speaker did great, and most of them had never tried anything like this before! What did I learn from NISSET? That staff with 1) solid speaking skills, 2) a willingness to be vulnerable and share their problems, and 3) the courage to try new things will do great with this type of speaking. It is much harder work than a Large Group talk. It is also by far the single most important component at an Edge. But it is worth the effort. (I'd be happy to talk with speakers with are considering growing in this about what was helpful for me in my development.)