



## A GLIMPSE INTO THE BERKELEY MISSION EXPERIENCE

*by Brett Kunkle - Stand to Reason*

This is a seven-part series of reflections from the very first Berkeley Mission in 2007, originally written for Stand to Reason's blog.

### The Berkeley Mission -- Part 1

Last week I arrived home from a six-day experimental missions trip. In partnership with [the student ministries of Rock Hills Church](#), we took a group of 24 high schoolers, college students, and adult staff to Berkeley, California.

Our goal: to expose Christian young people to secular thought in order to help them cultivate a Christian worldview. Rather than isolate students in a "Christian ghetto," we want to inoculate them from false views. What better place than Berkeley to give them a taste of [the people who are waiting for them](#) once they leave the safety of a Christian home, church or youth group.

Since I was not aware of anyone else who had done a trip like this, I had to start from scratch in terms of creating an itinerary. By the time we left for Berkeley, we had a packed schedule. Here is a sampling of what we did:

- **Friday the 17th:** We hooked up with InterVarsity's [Cal Christian Fellowship](#) and joined them for their weekly meeting. After worship and teaching, we sat down with a couple of Cal students who are engaging the campus at an apologetic level, one student through an [IDEA club](#) and the other through monthly gatherings to discuss tough questions. This was an opportunity to show our students that there are courageous believers making a difference even in a hostile environment like Berkeley.
- **Saturday the 18th:** During the morning, Mark Thomas of the [Atheists of the Silicon Valley](#) met with our group and presented [his arguments against theism and for atheism](#). In the afternoon Josiah Greene, from the Berkeley club [SANE](#) (Students for A Non-religious Ethos), did the same.
- **Sunday the 19th:** After some down time at the famous [Fisherman's Wharf](#), we joined up with Berkeley's campus group [Fiat Lux](#) for some lively, yet very respectful, discussion with both Christians and non-Christians regarding intellectual objections to Christianity.
- **Monday the 20th:** In the morning, students worked on apologetic presentations they were assigned, which they delivered to the group that evening. In between, David Fitzgerald of the [San Francisco Atheists](#) and Larry Hicok of the [East Bay Atheists](#) jointly presented their arguments against Christianity in particular and for atheism, followed by a lively time of Q & A.

- **Tuesday the 21st:** In the morning we visited the **Unitarian Universalist Church of Berkeley** where **Reverend Bill Hamilton-Holway** discussed the distinctive beliefs of Unitarian Universalists. Afterward, we spent some time doing surveys and engaging in conversations on the campus of **U.C. Berkeley**. We spent the afternoon at the home of **Phillip E. Johnson** as he discussed Intelligent Design with our students (for me, this was the highlight of the trip).
- **Wednesday the 22nd:** We departed early and returned to Southern California.

It was an incredible trip and I hope to be able to do this with other youth groups, as well. Over the next several days I will be unpacking my reflections on the trip.

## **The Berkeley Mission -- Part 2**

When I told people I was *willingly* taking a youth group to Berkeley, reactions were mixed. Some were very excited about such an opportunity while others were a bit unsure of the trip. For many, Berkeley conjures up images of tie-dyed hippies gathering in communes or wild-eyed university professors screaming at the top of their lungs. But **The Berkeley Mission** is right in step with Stand to Reason's approach to false ideas: **don't isolate yourself, inoculate yourself**. I did learn a couple of things about inoculation, however.

1. **Inoculation must be done carefully:** Medically speaking, when someone gets an inoculation like a flu shot, they are exposed to a controlled amount of the actual virus in order to protect themselves from it. But too much exposure to the virus can actually make one sick and this lesson seemed to apply to Berkeley, as well. Exposing the students to too much too quickly could easily overwhelm them. We had to constantly gauge how students were handling the challenges set before them, and we found that it was essential to debrief after each encounter, helping students think through the false ideas presented.
2. **Inoculation can be risky:** Berkeley was intense. Our presenters were typically atheists with years of reflection on these matters. They had the advantage of being able to think through the arguments and objections over a longer period of time than our young students. Could you imagine if one of our students decided to walk away from Christianity due to this trip? I'd probably be looking for another job right now! However, even though inoculation can be a bit risky two things were on our side. First, as Greg has said before, some of the smartest people make the most basic mistakes in thinking when it comes to spiritual matters. This occurred again and again, and eventually, the students began to see this for themselves. Secondly, if Christianity is actually true, then every argument against it will be flawed by its very nature. It was just a matter of helping our students uncover the flaws.

Even though it can be risky, I think inoculating our kids is essential. In fact, just this week I was told about a young woman who grew up in a Christian home, attended a Christian college, and upon graduation entered the workplace. After realizing that non-Christians seemed to be happy without God and that people weren't begging for her Christian answers, she has begun seriously doubting Christianity. It may actually be *riskier* when we do not inoculate our young people.

I think there are [other ways to begin the process of inoculation](#) but ultimately, you want your kids to be able to handle something like The Berkeley Mission.

### **The Berkeley Mission -- Part 3**

Throughout [The Berkeley Mission](#), it became clear that not just any youth group would be ready for this kind of trip -- and not just any youth pastor either. After the first couple of atheist presentations some of our students were a little shaken. Of course, afterward we debriefed the students, pointed out the atheist's fallacies, and walked them through the arguments. But we weren't working with blank slates. Teaching students how to think Christianly and training them in apologetics is just a regular part of [Rock Hills' ministry to students](#). Look at some of the teaching series they do with their high school students:

- [The Probability of Theism](#)
- [The Popularity of Atheism](#)
- [Love Letter: the Scriptures are Reliable](#)

Not your typical youth group messages, to be sure! (You can check out a list of their past teaching series [here](#) -- click on the links at the top of the page, as well) Thus, these students had a strong foundation that enabled us to expose them to serious secular thought. [The students heard the atheist's arguments from us first.](#)

Not only did the students need to have some foundational training but the youth pastor and I had to be on the same page. If we weren't, I can imagine just a bit of discord as he saw a few of his students struggling with some of the challenges that we *purposefully* put before them. But [Jim Wallace](#) (at the bottom of the page) is a youth pastor who is serious about preparing students for the challenges that await them at a secular university or workplace. He understands that it is better for students to be exposed to secular thought while they are still with us, rather than have their faith blasted for the first time by a college professor at a secular university living 2,000 miles away from us.

Since we shared the same vision, we were able to work effectively as a team, and by the end of the trip, students were sharing how their confidence in Christ had actually grown. As one of the initially "shaken" students shared:

"Berkeley was one of the most amazing experiences I have had in my walk with the Lord. It truly made me analyze my own faith in Jesus and the Bible. I learned that Christianity is the one true religion, not just for me but for the entire world. This experience opened my eyes to other beliefs out in the world and gave me even more assurance that what I believe is true. It was cool to see that all other worldviews break down compared to the TRUTH that we have as followers of Christ. This trip grew me closer to the ultimate supreme being of the universe...."

### **The Berkeley Mission -- Part 4**

During the [The Berkeley Mission](#) we invited Mark Thomas of the [Atheists of Silicon Valley](#) to present his arguments against theism and for atheism to our students. His presentation basically consisted of the arguments in his ["Why Atheism"](#) web article.

Mark opened up by seemingly describing the history of Jesus' life: "he was born of a virgin," "shepherds visited during his birth," "he was a great teacher," "he had twelve disciples." However, at the end of the description, Mark let us in on a secret. He was not describing Jesus of Nazareth but rather, Mithra, a mythological pagan figure. Fortunately, Mark's introduction did not have its intended shock effect on our students. We had already exposed them to the Mithra story and **a thorough refutation**.

Next, Mark moved into a characterization of the Christian position and in his mind, summarized our arguments by holding up a sign that read, "God did it." According to Mark, "If a person doesn't know how something works or why something happened, they can say, 'God did it.' This is known as the 'god of the gaps,' or the 'argument from ignorance'...Science looks for natural causes, while religion looks for supernatural causes." Of course, this was merely a caricature of our position and one which our students were prepared for. We had given them some basic tools of logic so they were able to recognize a straw man when they saw one. Indeed, our students would have argued against this position themselves!

To be fair to Mark, he outlined his seven basic arguments for concluding that the God of Christianity does not exist as follows:

1. The definition of Yahweh is logically inconsistent and describes a being that cannot exist.
2. There is no need for any God to explain the universe.
3. There is no empirical evidence for God.
4. There are the moral failings of the Bible
5. There is no reliable historical evidence for Jesus.
6. The problem of evil proves that God does not exist.
7. All the arguments attempting to prove that God exists fail.

Unfortunately, these arguments were not well-developed and he seemed to fall back on caricatures of theism. Throughout, the presentation was marked by the following kinds of statements and claims:

- Mark asked, "If our rights come from God, where did they exist before government started enforcing these rights?"
- He compared belief in God to belief in Santa Claus.
- He stated that "reason and evidence rather than religious faith are the sources of religious truth."
- Mark claimed, "The characteristics of Yahweh are man-made...Pretty much everything we can say about Yahweh can be said about Zeus and many of the other gods."
- Mark stated, "One of the biggest weaknesses in using God to explain anything scientifically is that the explanation is not falsifiable and thus, not even testable."
- He stated that Intelligent Design was a "god of the gaps" argument, it wasn't falsifiable, and is simply not science. (During the Q & A, I asked him which ID authors he has read and he said, "I don't read them because to me, it's garbage. It's just saying well this is magic, we don't know how this is, so therefore it's magic!")

Well, the exciting part was watching our students during the Q & A time. They peppered Mark with intelligent and articulate questions, not with ad hominem or angry reactions. They were equipped with the knowledge to question his views on evolution, point out his "science-of-the-gaps" argument, and point to the inconsistencies and absurdities in his moral views. Rather than weakening our student's faith in God, Mark actually helped strengthen it.

## The Berkeley Mission -- Part 5

During [The Berkeley Mission](#), we discovered a stark contrast between the atheists who did presentations for our group and the students we encountered on Berkeley's campus. Several of our afternoons were spent conducting "conversational surveys" on campus. We used a series of questions on religious and moral matters as a springboard into conversation. Our group discovered that the vast majority of students surveyed had never given these questions much thought. In fact, we found we had to carefully walk most Berkeley students through the questions and help them think through their reasoning right there on the spot. Not one student surveyed offered our group a serious intellectual challenge.

In contrast, the atheists had thought through their positions, were able to engage questions and respond to objections. They challenged us with their ideas. Now, I'm sure this was largely due to the fact they were involved in atheistic "activism" and were coming to present their religious arguments to a hostile crowd, ideologically speaking. However, it got me thinking about how our ideas about truth impact the level of engagement we have with religious and moral questions.

The atheists were "good ole' modernists" in the sense of holding to a [correspondence view of truth](#). They believe there is a real world "out there" and thus, they want their beliefs to fit that reality. Indeed, there was not a single discussion about the nature of truth with the atheists. No arguments over relativism. Not a single postmodernist in the atheistic crowd. Regarding truth, we were on the same playing field.

However, when we talked with Berkeley students it was clear they had been infected by the relativism so pervasive in culture. Religious truth is relative to individuals or cultures. Moral truth is relative, as well. Thus many students seemed to be characterized by a "whatever believism" -- believe whatever you want because it is all relative anyway. Given this, it is easy to see why these students are not motivated to think carefully through religious and moral matters. At the end of the day, it does not really matter what you believe regarding personal and subjective things like religion and morality (think Schaeffer's two-story view of truth).

It was the perfect opportunity to impress upon our students that Christianity is [total truth](#). Christianity makes metaphysical claims (yes, we taught these high schoolers what [metaphysics](#) is!), claims about the way the world really is. Therefore, we ought to give our *best thinking* to religious and moral matters. If we get these things wrong, there are real consequences. In addition, we were able to encourage our students with the fact that they had done more reflection on these matters than 95% of the people they will ever encounter.

## The Berkeley Mission -- Part 6

The final day of [The Berkeley Mission](#) was unforgettable. After five full days of rigorous activity we wanted to spend the last day really building into and encouraging our students. What better way to do this than spend an afternoon at the home of [Dr. Phillip Johnson](#).

Of course, Phillip Johnson is the man responsible for spear-heading the [Intelligent Design](#) movement, a movement in the throes of a fierce cultural battle with an evolutionary worldview entrenched in the major structures and thought forms of our society. Dr. Johnson has given a good fifteen years of his life to this particular battle and God has used his efforts mightily.

24 students and adults crammed into the Johnson living room. What a surreal moment. Sitting before us was a man who had given his life to the cause of Christ and whose impact will be felt long after he has passed from this earthly existence.

You could hear a pin drop as Dr. Johnson spoke. Even after suffering two recent strokes, his mind is incredibly sharp. With each question, Dr. Johnson launched into lucid explanation. Not only that, but his tender heart for the Lord was just as evident. Indeed, he shared with us how God has used his strokes to form his character. What a contrast in perspective to his atheistic counterparts who rail against God for ills of the world. Dr. Johnson truly knows what it means to “consider it all joy...when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance” (James 1:2-3).

I have never seen a group of high schoolers so quiet, so reverent. Clearly they understood the great honor it was to be in this man’s home and more importantly, to be in the presence of someone who has faithfully served the Creator with immeasurable impact. Our students did not leave the encounter with Phillip Johnson unmoved.

## **The Berkeley Mission -- Part 7**

This will be my final post on [The Berkeley Mission](#). As I mentioned in earlier posts, we had the opportunity for some [in-depth interaction](#) with serious atheists. There were four different presentations with plenty of Q & A. Two particular insights were reinforced from these interactions:

**#1 - We need to raise the level of expectations we have for the training of our young people.** High school students are capable of much more than the evangelical world typically offers them. We expect plenty when it comes to their school work or sports training but for some reason, we don't want to get "too theological" or "too intellectual" when it comes to their Christianity. In fact, much of what we offer is simply a repackaging of two basic messages: 1) "Be good" and 2) "Love Jesus." Oftentimes, that is about as deep as we go with them in our churches and youth groups.

David Fitzgerald of the [San Francisco Atheists](#) noted the results when we raise expectations, with an e-mail to me the day after his presentation to our group: “Just wanted to send a quick note to say what a great time we had meeting you and your group yesterday. I was really knocked out by the quality of the questions everybody raised. Very refreshing...I was really impressed with your group.” [Richard Carrier](#), a [prominent atheist](#) who sat in on our sessions, gave me similar feedback: "I think you have a really good program. It's something I've wanted to create for atheists, too, but up to now I've not had the time or resources...I'd love to speak at any venue for you...The idea of getting a chance to communicate with high school students is also attractive, especially seeing how intelligent your kids were--I think they were ready for deeper discussion than Larry [of the East Bay Atheists] or David could provide."

We raised the bar for our students, they responded and God Spirit's worked powerfully in their lives.

**#2 - The most compelling atheists were gracious, winsome and attractive.** We found much similarity in the particular arguments each of the four atheists made during their presentations. However, the two atheists who had the biggest impact on our group were Josiah Greene from

**SANE** and David Fitzgerald. During our interaction with these two men, they seemed kind-hearted, gracious, non-defensive, easy-going, calm and patient, and even humorous. Their lives were attractive and winsome. Thus, their character commended their message.

Of course, this hits home with us at Stand to Reason. This lines up with our **Ambassador's Creed**. It was a good reminder that those we want to reach with our message will listen more carefully and be more open to our ideas when our lives are marked by virtue. In the world of apologetics, where oftentimes the majority of our attention is given to the quality of our ideas, we must also give attention to our character. For many of the people we talk to, Emerson's words ring true: "What you are shouts so loudly in my ears I cannot hear what you say."