SECULAR STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF CHRISTIAN RHETORIC: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

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by

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APPROVAL SHEET

SECULAR STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS

OF CHRISTIAN RHETORIC:

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To Paul Laywell, the Eastabrook Family,

and Covenant Christian Academy.

If not for your love and investment,

I would have never completed this program.

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PREFACE

On June 17, 2017, several months into the Ed.D. program, I journaled the following:

> Today I'm questioning the direction I'm facing, hearing the voices of my inadequacies and shortcomings, feeling ill equipped for this work and discouraged to keep walking down a path that feels so unpaved and foreign. I am trying to remind myself that the Father has given me enough bread for today, but I keep gathering for future days which only brings me rotting worry. I have asked Him to rescue my mind and heart from wayward thoughts and the heavy yoke of anxiety/depression and to replace them with a sustaining sense of the ease of His load.

During many moments of this program, I felt like the man whose friends dug a hole in a roof and lowered him down to Jesus. Often, I felt spiritually, emotionally, mentally, and physically paralyzed by personal struggles, and a group of people compassionately placed me on a mat, gripped a corner of it, and carried me—people like Charis Wacker, Rebecca Wickersham, Nicole Okerlund, Paul Laywell, Megan Eastabrook, Deidre Bevers, Deanne Carter, Amy Schappert, and the Ed.D. Cohort of 2017. The body of Christ in motion is beautiful, and I am grateful to be a small member alongside these people.

I am thankful for my parents, Bill and Carolyn Sierra along with my God-parents, Donna and Calvin East and Mary Mills, who wrote letters, sent money, covered travel during this program, and have been my biggest advocates since the day I was born. To Nick and Alyson, thank you for knowing me, loving me, and giving me a place to stay whenever I have needed. My family's love for me is a precious gift engraved on my heart.

Thank you to Covenant Christian Academy, namely Tom Browning, Justice Kerr, Beth Saladino, and Kelly Wofford. Your financial, emotional, mental, and spiritual support are invaluable to me. There is no better place to invest in the lives of students,

and it is because of your friendship and love of our Savior; I love you each dearly.

A special thank you to Paul Laywell for serving as a sounding board, mentor, brother, and editor. You, dear friend, are truly the best of the best, a master teacher, and a winsome storyteller.

I am grateful to Ryan, Natalie, Megan, Mary, and Michael Eastabrook. Thank you for supporting me and loving me as your own. I cherish and love you deeply.

I am indebted to Southern Seminary for allowing me the opportunity to journey through this program. To my supervisor, Dr. Shane Parker, thank you for your encouragement, feedback, and direction. Dr. Michael Wilder, thank you for telling me that I had something worthy of contribution to the bride of Christ. Dr. Timothy Paul Jones, you are a joy to study under, and your classes were filled with grace and truth; I am thankful for your authentic character. And to Dr. Jonathan Pennington, you will never know the contribution you have made to my life and understanding of the Bible; your astute observations, your explanations of intratextuality and intertextuality, and your teaching of fallen condition and redemptive solution have shaped me, and I believe my thesis is evidence. Thank you.

I am thankful to the Secular Student Alliance for taking a chance on a woman from the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. Thank you for letting me into your lives, for trusting me, and allowing me the privilege to listen to your journey.

Lastly, Avery Grace Sierra, my prized niece, you are the delight of my life. Thank you for bringing me joy in a season I most needed. No matter, I love you unconditionally.

To the invisible God made known, Jesus Christ, you are breathtaking and worthy to behold.

Lauren Sierra

Fort Worth, Texas

December 2019

CHAPTER 1

RESEARCH CONCERN

Stanford graduate student, Elizabeth Newton, earned a Ph.D. in psychology by conducting a unique communications study in which she assigned people one of two roles: "tapper" or "listener."[1] The tappers were instructed to select a well-known song like "Happy Birthday" or the "Star-Spangled Banner" and tap the rhythm of the tune on a desk. The listeners' role was to identify the song tapped.

Newton asked tappers to estimate the number of times that he or she *thought* the listeners would identify the song correctly, and the tappers estimated that the listeners would recognize the correct song one out of two times, 50 percent. However, listeners identified the song correctly only *one* out of *forty* times, *2.5* percent. While tappers believed their message (the song) to be coherent, it was unintelligible thirty-nine out of forty times. Why? Chip and Dan Heath note, "The problem is that once we know something—say, the melody of a song—we find it hard to imagine not knowing it. Our knowledge has 'cursed' us. We have difficulty sharing it with others, because we can't readily re-create their state of mind."[2]

Newton's study raises essential questions that necessitate answers from Christians. For example, are Christians "tapping" the gospel, the beautiful and winsome work of Christ, clearly? Is communication of the gospel message perceived as loving, reasonable, and easy to comprehend? Or, is it perceived as an irrational and unattractive

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[1] Elizabeth Newton, "The Rocky Road from Actions to Intentions" (PhD diss., Stanford University, 1990). See also Chip Heath and Dan Heath, "The Curse of Knowledge," *Harvard Business Review* (December 2006), https://hbr.org/2006/12/the-curse-of-knowledge.

[2] Heath and Heath, "The Curse of Knowledge."

script, where Christians do all the talking and non-Christians do all the listening?[3] Are Christians using a vocabulary foreign to those outside the community of faith? In short, how do people with different worldviews perceive the rhetoric of apologetics and evangelism? The gospel is a melodious truth that deserves to be tapped in a manner worthy of Jesus Christ, lending clarity, understanding, and love. Yet, is this what the listener hears? These questions demand a serious examination of Christian rhetoric[4] in the United States, a nation experiencing a dramatic rise in secularism.[5]

Introduction to the Research Problem

Very simply, rhetoric is the art of persuasion.[6] James B. Nance asserts that rhetoric "is measured by our ability to teach men the truth, to move men to goodness, and to delight men with verbal beauty."[7] In other words, rhetoric is an invitation in which the rhetorician pulls out a chair and compels her hearers to take a seat at the table of truth.[8] The rhetorician persuades using Aristotle's three basic elements of persuasion: logos

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[3] David Kinnaman and Aly Hawkins, *You Lost Me* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011), 9.

[4] As used in this study, the phrase "Christian rhetoric" refers to a Christian's use of rhetorical elements as revealed in the biblical metanarrative to persuade his or her fellow man of the truth and beauty of the gospel. The term applies to rhetorical elements used in both evangelism and pre-evangelism/ apologetics.

[5] Phil Zuckerman, *Living the Secular Life: New Answers to Old Questions* (New York: Penguin Books, 2015), 9.

[6] Aristotle, *The Art of Rhetoric*, trans. W. Rhys Roberts, accessed November 15, 2017, http://www.wendelberger.com/downloads/Aristotle_Rhetoric.pdf, 10.

[7] James B. Nance, *Fitting Words: Classical Rhetoric for the Christian Student* (Moscow, ID: Romans Roads Media, 2016), 10. Nance adapts his definition from Cicero, who is quoted in Augustine. See Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, trans. Marcus Dods, in *Augustine, Great Books of the Western World*, vol. 16, ed. Mortimer Adler, 2nd ed. (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, 1990), 83.

[8] Aristotle, *The Art of Rhetoric*, 6.

(reason), pathos (emotion), and ethos (character).[9] Jay Heinrichs simplifies by saying, "our brain tries to sort the facts, our gut tells us if we can trust the other person, and our heart makes us want to do something about it."[10] The rhetorician knows his audience to such a degree that he is able to contextualize through proper decorum, which includes language, tone, and gesture.[11] Moreover, whatever the subject, the rhetorician reads the audience's opposition and meets it with honesty, grace, humility, and vulnerability.[12] In other words, no matter the subject, if logic (logos) outruns genuine love (pathos), the rhetorician loses the audience.[13]

Appropriate rhetoric is critical to any persuasive endeavor because it is used to navigate people to truth.[14] Christianity is rooted in absolute truth, the belief that Jesus Christ is *the* way, *the* truth, and *the* life, and Christians are explicitly called to communicate this truth to the world.[15] Most importantly, as Christians teach men truth, move men to goodness, and delight men with verbal beauty, they image God, the Master Rhetorician.[16]

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[9] Aristotle, *The Art of Rhetoric,* 10-11. See also Jay Heinrichs, *Thank You for Arguing: What Aristotle, Lincoln, and Homer Simpson Can Teach Us about the Art of Persuasion,* rev. and updated ed. (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2013), 40; Nance, *Fitting Words*, 85-102, 169-80.

[10] Heinrichs, *Thank You for Arguing*, 40.

[11] Heinrichs, *Thank You for Arguing*, 48.

[12] Aristotle, *The Art of Rhetoric,* 10. See also Richard Toye, *Rhetoric: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 13; Os Guinness, *Fool's Talk: Recovering the Art of Christian Persuasion* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2015), 176.

[13] Guinness, *Fool's Talk*, 171.

[14] James W. Sire, *The Universe Next Door* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2009), 29.

[15] John 14:6; Matt 28:18-20; John 20:21; Luke 24:44-53; Acts 1:8.

[16] God crafts man in his image, in his likeness. Thus, when people teach the truth, move people to goodness, and delight others with verbal beauty, they imitate God. Nance, *Fitting Words,* 10. The God of the Bible speaks, and as his image bearers, humankind speaks. Moreover, since Christians are the primary vessels by which God pushes forward his gospel to the world, it is important to measure whether Christians are being faithful to the telos for which they have been called (Matt 28:18-20, Rom 10:13-17, Acts 1:8).

Unfortunately, Christians are perceived as hypocritical, anti-homosexual, sheltered, too political, and judgmental.[17] If Christians are perceived in this manner, what is it about their rhetoric that has contributed to these assessments? Specifically, how are Christian evangelism and apologetics perceived by those who hold secular worldviews, including atheism, agnosticism, humanism, skepticism, and other such free thinking?[18] Because multiple studies indicate that secularism is on the rise, particularly within Generation Z, these questions must be addressed.[19] For example, according to Barna Group, the percentage of Generation Z who identify as atheist doubles the general population of atheists.[20] Additionally, Pew Research reports that 42 percent of eighteen to twenty-nine-year-olds identify as atheist or agnostic.[21] Because secularism is on the rise and the memory of the gospel is fading, Christians must be versed in rhetoric.[22]

Problematically, a Christian may perceive his or her rhetoric one way, but secularists may perceive it in an altogether different manner. What do Gen Z secularists perceive to be the shortcomings of Christian logos, pathos, and ethos in relation to gospel-persuasion? More specifically, why are secular university students unconvinced by Christian persuasion? Research addressing this question is minimal.

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[17] David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, *Unchristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks about Christianity and Why It Matters* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 25.

[18] Zuckerman, *Living the Secular Life*, 9.

[19] Generation Z begins with the freshman class of 2015, following Generation X (Baby Boomers) and Generation Y (Millennials). See James Emery White, *Meet Generation Z: Understanding and Reaching the New Post-Christian World* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2017), 37.

[20] See Barna Group, "Atheism Doubles Among Generation Z," January 24, 2018, https://www.barnacom/research/atheism-doubles-among-generation-z/.

[21] Cary Funk and Gregory A. Smith, "'Nones' on the Rise: One-in-Five Adults Have No Religious Affiliation," *Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion & Public Life*, October, 9, 2012, https://www.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/7/2012/10/NonesOnTheRise-full.pdf, 33.

[22] James Emery White, *Rise of the Nones: Understanding and Reaching the Religiously Unaffiliated* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2014), 43.

Current Status of Research Problem

A plethora of valuable literature on secularism and skepticism stocks the shelves of Christian bookstores, but few resources address elements of rhetoric.[23] When discussing the art of Christian persuasion, Os Guinness writes, "We are more likely to find that recent forms of evangelism are modeled not on classical rhetoric or even on good communication theory, but on handbooks for effective sales techniques."[24] Holly Ordway reinforces this assertion when she describes the power of words in Christian rhetoric as follows: "Before anything can either be true or false it must mean. . . . For the purposes of apologetics, as for the purposes of writing, it is not the words themselves, but the reader or listener's encounter (or potential encounter) with the words that matters."[25] In other words, both Guinness and Ordway argue that perception of language is crucial to Christian persuasion, but research investigating the role of rhetoric in evangelism and apologetics with increasing secularism, is essentially, non-existent.

Although there is an abundance of literature devoted to the rise of secularism in the United States, research related to how secularists within Generation Z perceive Christian rhetoric is minimal.[26] For example, both Pew Research and Trinity College examined religious affiliations by age for individuals born between 1913-1990 and noted

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[23] For books that consider evangelism, apologetics, and secularism, see Timothy Keller, *Making Sense of God: An Invitation to the Skeptical* (New York: Viking, 2016); Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism* (New York: Dutton, 2008); Norman L. Geisler, *The Big Book of Christian Apologetics: An A to Z Guide* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2012); Norman L. Geisler and Ronald M. Brooks, *When Skeptics Ask: A Handbook on Christian Evidences* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2013); Nancy Pearcey, *Finding Truth: 5 Principles for Unmasking Atheism, Secularism, and Other God Substitutes* (Colorado Springs: David C Cook, 2015); Holly Ordway, *Apologetics and the Christian Imagination: An Integrated Approach to Defending the Faith* (Steubenville, OH: Emmaus Road, 2017).

[24] Guinness, *Fool's Talk*, 39-40.

[25] Ordway, *Apologetics and the Christian Imagination*, 30.

[26] For books on Christianity as it relates to Generation Z, see White, *Rise of the Nones*; Barna Group, *Gen Z: The Culture, Beliefs, and Motivations Shaping the Next Generation* (Ventura, CA: Barna Group and Impact 360 Institute, 2018); White, *Meet Generation Z*; Corey Seemilar and Meghan Grace, *Generation Z Goes to College* (San Francisco: Jossey- Bass, 2016).

a significant rise in secularism among Millennials, but neither study examined secularists' perceptions of Christian persuasion, nor did they analyze Generation Z, the first post-Christian generation.[27] The most relevant research related to secular students' perceptions of Christian rhetoric is the 2016 Barna Group study devoted to how non-Christians in the United Kingdom perceive Christianity, Christians, and evangelism.[28] In this study, 43 percent of non-Christians said their evangelistic experience "made them glad not to be a Christian."[29] However, no identifiable study has examined the role Christian rhetoric plays in these perceptions. What is it that non-Christians hear Christians saying that Christians do not hear themselves saying? These questions indicate the need for research relating to how secular students perceive Christian rhetoric.

Research Purpose

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand how secular, Gen Z, college students have experienced the phenomenon of Christian rhetoric. In an effort to increase understanding of participants' experiences with the phenomenon, open-ended questions were used. Additionally, participants were asked to provide any other personal materials they deem applicable to the study.[30] Once data was gathered, coded, and analyzed, it was interpreted and used to shape Christian rhetorical praxis.

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[27] Funk and Smith, "'Nones' on the Rise." Also see Barry A. Kosmin and Ariela Keysar, "Religious, Spiritual and Secular: The Emergence of Three Distinct Worldviews among American College Studentsm," *American Religious Identification Survey at Trinity College*, September 2013, https://www.trincoll.edu/Academics/centers/isssc/Documents/ARIS_2013_College%20Students_Sept_25_final_draft.pdf; White, *Meet Generation Z*, 49.

[28] Barna Group, "Perceptions of Jesus, Christians, and Evangelism in the UK," February 10, 2016, https://www.barna.com/research/perceptions-of-jesus-christians-evangelism-in-the-uk/.

[29] Barna Group, "Perceptions of Jesus, Christians, and Evangelism in the UK."

[30] John Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing among Five Approaches*, 3rd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2013), 81; Johnny Saldaña, *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*, 3rd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2016), 3-4.

Delimitations of Research and Sample

The appropriate sampling size of a phenomenology is five to twenty-five interviews; this study was limited to ten participants.[31] Each participant was a member of a Secular Student Alliance (hereafter SSA) at a Texas university, born no earlier than 1995. Based on the phenomenological nature of the study, insights were restricted to participants meeting the aforementioned criteria.

The study utilized an initial purposive criterion sample, followed by purposive random sampling. Initially, all Texas university campuses with an SSA were contacted and invited to participate. The first five SSA affiliates willing to participate were then selected for the study. In the purposive random sampling, undergraduates, born no earlier than 1995, with exposure to Christian rhetoric were identified. Subsequently, two students were randomly selected from each university for participation.[32]

Terminology

The following terms and their definitions are used throughout the study:

Agnostic. "A person who believes that nothing is known, or can be known, of the existence or nature of God or of anything beyond material phenomena."[33]

Apologetics/pre-evangelism. A defense of Christian truth claims through rationale, history, archeology, and experience.[34]

Atheist. One who holds "the theory or belief that God does not exist."[35]

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[31] Creswell recommends that "researchers interview 5-25 individuals who have experienced the phenomenon." Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design*, 81.

[32] Those born no earlier than 1995 accounted for college students in Generation Z. See White, *Meet Generation Z*, 37.

[33] *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English*, 8th ed., s.v. "agnostic."

[34] Geisler, *The Big Book of Christian Apologetics,* 28-30.

[35] *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English*, s.v. "atheist."

Christian rhetoric. Christians' use of rhetorical elements as revealed in the biblical metanarrative to persuade his or her fellow man of the truth and beauty of the gospel. The term applies to rhetorical elements used in both evangelism and pre-evangelism/apologetics.[36]

Ethos. "The distinguishing character, sentiment, moral nature, or guiding beliefs of a person, group, or institution."[37]

Evangelism. "Evangelism is teaching (heralding, proclaiming, preaching) the gospel (the message from God that leads us to salvation) with the aim (hope, desire, goal) to persuade (convince, convert)."[38]

Free thinker. "A person who rejects dogma or authority, especially in religious belief."[39]

Generation Z. For the purposes of this study, Generation Z is defined as individuals born no earlier than 1995.[40]

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[36] In short, Christian rhetoric is a Christian's use of classical rhetoric as seen in the Bible for the purpose of persuading all people toward the gospel of Jesus Christ. It is defined based on the major rhetorical elements; namely, logos, pathos, ethos, and understanding one's audience as revealed in the biblical metanarrative. The term "Christian rhetoric" is detailed in chap. 2. See also Guinness, *Fool's Talk*, 40.

[37] *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, 11th ed., s.v. "ethos."

[38] Mack J. Stiles, *Evangelism: How the Whole Church Speaks of Jesus* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014), 27. Packer similarly describes evangelism as "a work of communication in which Christians make themselves mouthpieces for God's message of mercy to sinners." J. I. Packer, *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2012), 45.

[39] *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English*, s.v. "free thinker."

[40] Exact dates as to what constitutes Generation Z differ (born anywhere from 1995-2015). According to White, Generation Z begins with the freshman class of 2015 (born no later than 1997), though White concedes that due to indeterminate dates, those born in 1995 and following may also be included in the generation. White, *Meet Generation Z,* 37-38. Seemilar and Grace note that Generation Z made their first appearance on university campuses in 2014 (born in 1996). Seemilar and Grace, *Generation Z Goes to College*, 6-8. Barna Group identifies Generation Z as the generation born between 1999 and 2015. Barna Group, "Who is Gen Z?" October 19, 2017, https://www.barna.com/who-is-gen-z/.

Gospel. The message that Jesus Christ lived a sinless life, died in the place of sinners, was buried and raised on the third day, and humanity comes to be included in salvation through faith in him and repentance of sin.[41]

Humanist. One who holds to "an outlook or system of thought concerned with human rather than divine or supernatural matters."[42]

Logos. The "science and the art of correct reasoning."[43]

Pathos. "Emotion or the emotional character of the audience."[44]

Perceive. "To attain awareness or understanding of."[45]

Rhetoric. The art of persuasive speaking and writing with logos, pathos, ethos, and understanding one's audience. The purpose of rhetoric is to embody effective speaking and writing that is "informative, powerful, and elegant."[46]

Secular. "Concerned with the affairs of this world; not spiritual or sacred . . . not concerned with religion or religious belief."[47]

Secularism. "Indifference to or rejection or exclusion of religion and religious considerations."[48]

Secularist. Non-religious regarding belief, behavior, and belonging (includes atheists, agnostics, humanists, skeptics, and free thinkers).[49] Secularists hold to no

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[41] Adapted from 1 Cor 15:1-4; and Greg Gilbert, *What Is the Gospel?* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 23-84.

[42] *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English*, s.v. "humanist."

[43] James B. Nance, *Intermediate Logic* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2014), 5.

[44] Toye, *Rhetoric,* 14.

[45] *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, s.v. "perceive."

[46] Nance, *Fitting Words*, 10.

[47] *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English*, s.v. "secular."

[48] *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, s.v. "secularism."

[49] Zuckerman, *Living the Secular Life*, 9.

transcendent belief, only the material. Secularists' behavior is not predicated on a particular religious affiliation, and secularists do not belong to a place of worship.[50]

Secular Student Alliance (SSA). The SSA "is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, national organization dedicated to atheist, humanist, and other non-theist students."[51]

Methodological Overview

All of the research instruments used in this thesis were performed in compliance with and approved by the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary Research Ethics Committee prior to use the thesis research. Once permission to conduct research was granted, a list of SSA's on university campuses in the state of Texas was identified.[52] Purposive criterion sampling was utilized to select five SSA's. Subsequently, each selected SSA was asked to generate a list of members who have experienced Christian rhetoric and who would be willing to participate in the study. This list was used in performing a purposive random sampling producing two willing participants from each SSA. Appropriate consent forms were provided and completed by participants.

In an attempt to capture each participants' holistic experience, instrumentation included broad open-ended questions, followed by clarifying sub-questions based on initial responses. Data collection consisted of audio recorded interviews and, in addition, participants were asked to provide any journals, blog posts, etc. that they deem applicable. Interviews took place on each college campus.

Once data was collected, it was transcribed and reviewed to identify significant themes, as indicated by tone, pauses, words, and phrases. NVivo coding software was then

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[50] Phil Zuckerman, telephone interview by author, February 9, 2018.

[51] The Secular Student Alliance, "About Us," accessed September 28, 2017, http://secularstudents.org/about.

[52] A national listing of SSA affiliates can be found at Secular Student Alliance, accessed February 9, 2018, https://secularstudents.org/find-a-chapter/.

used to identify emergent codes that provided insight into secular students' perceptions of Christian rhetoric.

Research Assumptions

The following assumptions were recognized:

1. The list of SSA affiliates was current and complete.
2. Participants self-identified accurately with regard to age, worldview, and experiences.
3. Participants answered interview questions in an accurate and candid manner.

Research Questions

The following research questions directed the study:

1. What are secular students' perceptions of their experiences with the phenomenon of Christian rhetoric?

Sub Questions

1. What role do the elements of logos, including choice of language and reason, play in secular students' perceptions of Christian rhetoric?
2. What role do the elements of pathos, including sympathetic imagination, inquiry, and openness play in secular students' perceptions of Christian rhetoric?[53]
3. What role do the elements of ethos, including trustworthiness, attentiveness, and decorum play in secular students' perceptions of Christian rhetoric?
4. What role does understanding one's audience play in secular students' perceptions of Christian rhetoric?

Instrumentation

Due to the qualitative nature of the study, open-ended questions were developed to assess secularists' perceptions of Christian rhetoric. After the participant clearly identified an occasion(s) in which he or she had been exposed to Christian rhetoric, a series of questions were asked, followed by clarifying questions in an effort to

[53] While the research sub question used the term sympathetic imagination, findings revealed participants longed for empathetic imagination. Hence, empathetic imagination was used in the analysis of findings. See chap. 4, pp. 78-80 for further explanation.

better understand responses. In particular, questions were designed to assess participants' perceptions of Christians' use of logos, pathos, ethos, and understanding one's audience. Second, the participant was asked to provide paper or digital copies of journals, poems, drawings, blog posts, etc. that may contribute to describing and understanding his or her perceptions of the phenomenon.

Conclusion

Chapter 1 contends that there is a pressing need to assess secular students' perceptions of Christian rhetoric. God has demonstrated his love to people by sending his Son into the world, and Christians are likewise sent into the world to tap the rhythm of the gospel, the winsome person and work of Christ Jesus.[54] Moreover, as Christians teach men the truth about God and the world, move people to moral goodness, and delight others with the beauty of the gospel, they image the Master Rhetorician who speaks the universe into existence, calls dead men to life, and declares forgiveness to those who have faith in him.[55] Because secularism is increasing, secularists' perceptions of how Christians present the gospel message must be examined.

[54] Rom 5:8; Matt 28:18-20; John 20:31; Acts 1:8.

[55] Gen 1; John 11:38-44; Acts 10:43.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

"But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light" (1 Pet 2:9). Christians are called to declare the gospel of Jesus Christ and to do so with accuracy and grace. But, is that what Christians are doing? Is the message Christians believe they are sharing with accuracy and grace perceived as such by those who do not believe their message?

The purpose of this chapter is to review the literature addressing how secular college students within Generation Z perceive Christian rhetoric. The chapter consists of four main sections and each section addresses a specific, increasingly narrower, part of the phenomenon. The sections are as follows: (a) analysis of the elements of classical rhetoric, (b) introduction to Christian rhetoric as revealed through the metanarrative of Scripture, (c) examination of the secular worldview and secularists' assessments of Christian rhetoric, and (d) analysis of Generation Z's distinguishing characteristics along with current efforts to reach them with the gospel of Jesus Christ. While the review of literature will identify research detailing the increase of secularism within Generation Z, it will also reveal an absence of research examining how secular college students within Generation Z perceive Christian rhetoric. Such findings mandate the phenomenological study as proposed.

Elements of Classical Rhetoric

The objective of rhetoric is to make truth convincing.[1] Alyssan Barnes writes, "It is not enough to win the argument—we must win the person."[2] In other words, rhetoric not only presents the truth, but seeks to persuade and welcome others into that truth. Though the following is not an exhaustive analysis, this section will address the foundational elements of classical rhetoric. Drawing largely from the *The Art of Rhetoric* by Aristotle, a work which, according to Brian Vickers, "remains the most penetrating analysis of speech in its full individual and social dimension," this section will address the following elements of rhetoric: logos, pathos, ethos, and understanding one's audience.[3]

Logos: The Role of Reason in Argument

Jay Heinrichs writes, "If arguments were children, *logos* would be the brainy one, the big sister who gets top grades in high school."[4] Logos, or argument by logic, "governs how the mind grasps truth."[5] The intent of logos is to lead people to truth and it achieves this by making accurate statements and reasoning with sound argument.[6] Logos

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[1] Alyssa Barnes, *Rhetoric Alive! Book 1: Principles of Persuasion* (Camp Hill, PA: Classical Academic Press, 2016), back cover.

[2] Barnes, *Rhetoric Alive!*, 7.

[3] Brian Vickers, *In Defense of Rhetoric* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 26. See also Barnes, *Rhetoric Alive!*, ix. Throughout this thesis, the longstanding works of Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian are used alongside modern writers like James Nance, Ryan Topping, Alyssa Barnes, Brian Vickers, Graham Priest, and Jay Heinrichs. While the works of these modern writers differ to some degree, all are dependent to varying degrees on the longstanding rhetorical ideologies of Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian. In short, terms and definitions as presented in this work were used based on both their longstanding existence and abundant use in literature.

[4] Jay Heinrichs, *Thank You for Arguing: What Aristotle, Lincoln, and Homer Simpson Can Teach Us about the Art of Persuasion*, rev. and updated ed. (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2013), 40.

[5] Ryan N. S. Topping, *The Elements of Rhetoric: How to Write and Speak Clearly and Persuasively* (Kettering, OH: Angelico Press, 2016), 9.

[6] James B. Nance, *Fitting Words: Classical Rhetoric for the Christian Student* (Moscow, ID: Romans Roads Media, 2016), 5, 169-79.

is used to establish the rationale, evidence, and relevance of an argument and it commonly accomplishes this by providing the listener with metaphors, analogies, illustrations, stories, parables, fables, and syllogisms.[7] Moreover, because logos concerns itself with truth, it also exposes falsities.[8] Augustine writes,

> The style of speech should make the truth pleasing . . . the truth itself, when exhibited in its naked simplicity, gives pleasure, because it is the truth. And hence even falsities are frequently a source of pleasure when they are brought to light and exposed. It is not, of course, their falsity that gives pleasure; but as it is true that they are false, the speech which shows this to be true gives pleasure.[9]

Logos, then, functions to both disclose truth and unmask fallacies related to a given question.[10] In sum, logos facilitates an audience's grasp of truth by identifying and constructing valid and truthful statements.[11]

Pathos: The Role of Emotion in Argument

While logos is concerned with how the mind grasps truth, pathos is what the orator does to put the audience in a receptive emotional frame. The rhetorician uses pathos to stir the listener's emotion so the emotions are equated with the truth that is being communicated. Aristotle writes, "Our judgments when we are pleased and friendly are not the same as when we are pained and hostile . . . understand the emotions—that is,

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[7] Nance, *Fitting Words*, 209-15.

[8] For a list of logical fallacies, see James B. Nance and Douglas Wilson, *Introductory Logic: The Fundamentals of Thinking Well*, 5th ed. (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2014), 255-72; Nance, *Fitting Words*, 243-58.

[9] Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, trans. Marcus Dods, in *Augustine: Great Books of the Western World*, ed. Mortimer Adler, 2nd ed. (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, 1990), 16701-84.

[10] Aristotle, *The Art of Rhetoric*, trans. W. Rhys Roberts, accessed November 15, 2017, http://www.wendelberger.com/downloads/Aristotle_Rhetoric.pdf, 11.

[10] Graham Priest, *Logic: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 2-3.

[11] Aristotle, *The Art of Rhetoric*, 11.

to name them and describe them, to know their causes and the way in which they are excited."[12] Appropriate pathos is often best realized through a detailed narrative, one which involves the orator or the audience.[13] In essence, stories. Holly Ordway writes, "[since] stories have the merit of being relational," the more vividly a story is told, the more likely the audience "will want to 'inhabit' that story and experience" the affections of the characters themselves.[14] While pathos befitting the occasion attempts to sync emotion with reason, the rhetorician must avoid manipulating or abusing the audience, something ethos seeks to evade.[15]

Ethos: The Role of Character in Argument

Simply, Barnes notes, ethos is "character embodied in speech."[16] Aristotle writes, "some writers assume in their treatises on rhetoric, that the personal goodness revealed by the speaker contributes nothing to his power of persuasion. On the contrary, his character may almost be called the most effective means of persuasion he possesses."[17] In other words, the individual's embodied virtue is his or her loudest rhetorical instrument. Regarding the Roman conception of ethos, Ryan N. S. Topping writes,

> Looking back on several hundred years of Greek political experience, as well as their own, they learned that character produces conviction. Quintilian defined the good orator simply as "vir bonus dicendi peritus" – a good man, expert in speech. They knew, while we forget, that if you wish others to believe you, they must first

[12] Aristotle, *The Art of Rhetoric*, 11.

[13] Nance, *Fitting Words*, 95. See also Heinrichs, *Thank You for Arguing*, 83.

[14] Holly Ordway, *Apologetics and the Christian Imagination: An Integrated Approach to Defending the Faith* (Steubenville, OH: Emmaus Road, 2017), 107, 108.

[15] Barnes, *Rhetoric Alive!*, 49-50.

[16] F. L. Lucas, *Style*, 3rd ed. (London: Harriman House, 2012), 35.

[17] Aristotle, *The Art of Rhetoric*, 11.

> like you, or at least not think you odious. The more you expect from your listener, the more they will require of your character.[18]

In short, ethos is the habit of being an admirable human being, and it is considered the apex of the rhetorical triad.[19]

Knowing the Audience: The Role of Accommodation in Argument

In Plato's *Phaedrus*, Socrates says to Phaedrus, "Oratory is the art of enchanting the soul, and therefore he who would be an orator has to learn the differences of human souls—they are so many and of such a nature, and from them come the differences between man and man . . . he must have experience of them in actual life."[20] It is Socrates' contention that the rhetorician must understand his or her audience and tailor the message for that audience. Contemporary rhetoricians agree; Os Guinness writes, "Every single person is unique and individual and deserves an approach that respects that uniqueness," and Toye states, "[Rhetoric is] not simply about creating beautiful phrases, but about reading situations and seeing how elements of them could be deployed most effectively in order to win over an audience (and about reading the specific audience to see what will work with *them*)."[21] In short, the orator knows the audience and adapts his or her message accordingly.

If the objective of rhetoric is to communicate truth and to invite others into that truth, then the aforementioned elements of classical rhetoric provide the rhetorician with the most effective means of leading his or her audience into the light of that truth. And,

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[18] Topping, *The Elements of Rhetoric,* 29.

[19] Topping, *The Elements of Rhetoric*, 31.

[20] Plato, "Phaedrus," trans. Benjamin Jowett, in *The Dialogue of Plato: Great Books of the Western World*, ed. Mortimer Adler, 2nd ed. (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, 1990), 6:115-41.

[21] Os Guinness, *Fool's Talk: Recovering the Art of Christian Persuasion* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2015), 33; Richard Toye, *Rhetoric: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 13.

because there is no brighter light than the truth of the Christian message, its communication must feature the elements of classical rhetoric as seen in the Scriptures.

The Biblical Metanarrative and Christian Rhetoric

Christian rhetoric is not merely Christians' use of classical rhetoric. Rather, it is Christians' use of rhetoric to persuade his or her fellow man of ultimate truth—the gospel—and this is accomplished through biblical imitation. In other words, according to James B. Nance, "God has given us the ability to speak and accomplish things through words. As His gift, the ability to speak should be employed in the way that He desires as taught in His word."[22] As important as classical rhetoric is, it is inadequate when considered apart from the Bible which is the source of ultimate truth.[23] Therefore, this section will seek to show how the elements of classical rhetoric are used throughout Scripture's metanarrative and, in particular, Creation, Fall, Redemption, and Restoration.

Creation: God, the Master Rhetorician

"In the beginning, God created" everything (Gen 1:1). He spoke, "Let there be," and it was.[24] The expanse of the cosmos sprang forth from his mouth, followed by the rhythmic refrain, "And God saw that it was good . . . . good . . . . good . . . . very

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[22] Nance, *Fitting Words*, 10.

[23] Guinness agrees: "Such basic categories as logos, ethos and pathos may be universal in application, but our gold standard is neither the best of the classics nor the most brilliant or brazen of the modern theorists, but the way in which God himself has spoken to us—supremely as we see it in the life of Jesus, the death of Jesus on the cross, and the stunning turn-around of the resurrection." Guinness, *Fool's Talk*, 40. It is also worth noting here that rhetoric does not have its beginning in Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, or Quintilian, but in their maker—God—who logically, winsomely, and honestly communicates truth to the world, who crafted humanity in his image.

[24] Gordon J. Wenham notes, "'God said.' This formula occurs ten times in this chapter. . . . Though it is of course taken for granted throughout the OT that God speaks, 'to say' is used here in a more pregnant sense than usual. It is a divine word of command that brings into existence what it expresses." In short, God speaks, and it is. Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, Word Bible Commentary, vol. 1 (Dallas: Word, 1987), 57-58.

good" (Gen 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31, 2:9, 2:12).[25] The God of the Bible is not like idols who "have mouths but do not speak," who "have no breath in their mouth" (Ps 135:16-17). On the contrary, when God speaks, truth, goodness, and beauty spring forth from his mouth; he orders the universe into existence and sustains it with the word of his power.[26] Moreover, in Genesis 1:27-28, God crafts human beings in his image, in his likeness. Thus, when people teach truth, move people to goodness, and delight others with verbal beauty, they imitate God, the Master Rhetorician.[27]

In the creation narrative, God provided human beings with an opportunity to demonstrate their love for him, trust in him, and obedience to him by giving them one command: "eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die" (Gen 2:16).[28] *I have made you.* This is the Master Rhetorician calling for obedience through logos. *Do you trust my voice?* This is the Master Rhetorician appealing through ethos, asking the man and woman to trust his revealed character.

The Fall: God's Rhetoric Questioned

The unraveling of God's harmonious and good creation begins with a rhetorical question from a crafty serpent: "Did God actually say . . . ?" (Gen 3:1). Here, the man and the woman are introduced to another voice, one that is the antithesis of

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[25] Wenham regards God's repetitious proclamation—"was good"—as God's "approval formula." He writes, "God the great artist is pictured admiring his handiwork. This account is a hymn to the creator: creation itself bears witness to the greatness and goodness of God. . . . God is preeminently the one who is good, and his goodness is reflected in his works." Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, 18. See also R. Kent Hughes, *Genesis: Beginning and Blessing* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004), 58.

[26] Gen 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31, 2:9, 2:12; Heb 1:3.

[27] Nance, *Fitting Words,* 10. See also Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, 32.

[28] C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *The Pentateuch*, trans. James Martin (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1885), 85-86; Graeme Goldsworthy, *According to Plan: The Unfolding Revelation of God in the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1991), 98; Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, 62-64.

God's, one that "does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him . . . he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies" (John 8:44). The serpent calls into question the logos, pathos, and ethos of God. His words are insidious, and the undertones of his question are clear: *God's voice cannot be trusted. Trust my voice.* The serpent continues, "You will not surely die . . . you will be *like God* knowing good and evil" (Gen 3:5, emphasis mine). The serpent, Richard Toye states, "justif[ies] all his diabolical practices with the subtleties of pretended reason"; he clothes his argument with the appearance of truth, but he is the embodiment of fallacy (from the Latin *fallo*, to fall or deceive).[29] The woman is one who is *already* like God and *already* knows "good . . . good . . . good," but she now questions her God-given identity. The serpent's lies sow doubt in her heart and mind; now she is suspicious of God. She is persuaded. She takes the fruit, eats, then gives some to the man and he eats (Gen 3:6). In short, "The woman listens to the serpent, the man listens to the woman, and no one listens to God."[30]

Persuaded by the fallacious serpent, humankind would now doubt the Master Rhetorician, the voice of truth. Though God's image bearers, humanity's rhetoric would now be stained; not only would human beings struggle to believe what is true, they would struggle to speak what is true. Their ears would be cuffed from the voice of the Master Rhetorician, and their rhetoric would be tainted with the venom of falsehood. Yet, in the midst of human chaos, God provided hope with an unwavering promise; someday, someone would come to conquer the lies of the serpent and give the people ears to hear the voice of truth again.[31]

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[29] Toye, *Rhetoric*, 23-24; Topping, *The Elements of Rhetoric*, 13.

[30] Kenneth A. Mathews, *Genesis 1-11:26,* The New American Commentary, vol. 1a (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1996), 220.

[31] Gen 3:15 has come to be known as the *protoevangelion*, the "first gospel." Hughes writes, What we have here is an astounding gospel prophecy. . . . The woman's offspring (literally "seed") here referred to Christ who would crush Satan's head. . . . [God] meant to communicate that his Son,

Seasons changed. Years came and went. Decades came to pass. Throughout the Old Testament, "the word of the LORD" would go out through prophets, priests, kings, and judges, but the people would remain persuaded by what was right in their own eyes and worship mute idols.[32] But God's promise endured. And one day, he came.

Redemption: The Embodiment of God's Rhetoric

John begins his gospel with a direct reference to Creation, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1).[33] Andreas J. Köstenberger writes,

> The designation "Word"—used in a Christological sense . . . —conveys the notion of divine self-expression or speech. The Genesis creation account establishes the effectiveness of God's word: he speaks, and things come to pass. Psalmists and prophets alike portray God's word in close-to-personal terms. Yet only John claims that this Word has appeared as an actual person, Jesus Christ.[34]

Concisely, the "Word," or *logos* (reason, wisdom, speech, or message), is God's ultimate self-disclosure in flesh.[35] God's reason was incarnated, his wisdom embodied, his speech and message sent in the form of a person; and this person was God, "God's own self."[36]

> the second Adam, as the ultimate offspring of Eve would be wounded in his destruction of Satan. . . . He himself was the antidote to the serpent's venom. . . . This great grace had its origins and image in the "first gospel" in the garden. There was hope in paradise lost!" (Hughes, *Genesis*, 85-87)

Wenham adds, "The NT also alludes to this passage [Gen 3:15], understanding it in a broadly messianic sense. . . . Certainly, later Christian commentators, beinning with Justin (ca. A.D. 160) and Irenaeus (ca. 180), have often regarded 3:15 as the Protoevangelium, the first messianic prophecy in the OT . . . mankind eventually to defeat the serpent's seed, the powers of evil." Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, 80-81.

[32] Deut 12:8, Judg 17:6, 21:5, Prov 21:2. See also Arthur W. Pink, *Gleanings from Genesis* (Chicago: Moody, 1922), 40.

[33] Andreas J. Köstenberger, *John,* Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 25.

[34] Köstenberger*, John*, 25.

[35] D. A. Carson, *The Gospel according to John,* Pillar New Testament Commentary Series (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 117.

[36] Carson, *The Gospel according to John*, 117. See also Köstenberger, *John*, 25-27.

Moreover, Jesus (the Word), who is both human and divine, serves as the mediator between people and God. Like a bilingual translator mediating between two people of different languages, so Christ, the God-man mediates relationship between God and man. He is the Creator-created, and as such, the language between the Creator and the created. In sum, Timothy Ward writes, "anyone who has encountered him in person has, in so doing, encountered God."[37]

While personifying logos, Jesus also expressed and elicited pathos when he marveled, sighed and wept.[38] He experienced compassion, sorrow, distress, and joy.[39] He was deeply moved, and he genuinely pitied.[40] Using questions, stories, parables, and teachings, his audience was often amazed, astonished, and indignant.[41] On other occasions, they were hopeful, joyful, fearful, and filled with awe.[42]

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[37] Timothy Ward, *Words of Life: Scripture as the Living and Active Word of God* (Nottingham, England: IVP, 2009), 37.

[38] Matt 8:10; Mark 7:34, 8:12; John 11:35.

[39] Matt 9:36; Mark 6:34, 8:2, 13:34; Luke 12:50; Heb 12:2.

[40] John 11:33; Matt 20:34.

[41] Matt 12:23; Mark 1:27; Luke 2:48, 11:38, 13:14.

[42] Luke 5:26, 24:21; Matt 27:54, 28:8. The gospels themselves do not just tell stories; each gospel is also a story itself. R. T. France writes,

> This anthology of stories about Jesus is no random collection. It is rather a carefully constructed whole, with a plot of dramatic intensity, in which various sub-plots are subtly interwoven so that the narrative moves inexorably toward its terrific climax in Jerusalem. Touches of paradox and flashes of humour keep the audience alert and involved, and enable us to become part of the utterly unique events of Jesus's ministry, conflict and death, and to share in the triumph of his resurrection. It is wrong, then, to treat each story or section of teaching in the gospels as if it existed in isolation. . . . Those who read the gospels merely to discover historical facts about Jesus may succeed in doing so, but they will have missed the point. The gospels are for those who would 'believe' and 'have life.' The facts about Jesus are recorded not for interest alone, but for response. (R. T. France, *Reading the Gospels*, The New Bible Commentary [Grand Rapids: IVP, 1994], 902-3)

In short, though the gospels themselves contain excellent rhetorical stories, these stories culminate to form a larger story of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, who, through the story of the gospels seeks to save the lost.

Jesus Christ, the logos and pathos of God, also spoke with authority. With his words he silenced untruth, gave mute men speech, cast out demons, calmed seas, healed the sick, and brought the dead to life; Jesus spoke, and it was.[43] Onlookers were astonished by the one who was "mighty in deed and word," one whose ethos and speech were in perfect harmony (Luke 24:19). Quintilian wrote that rhetoric is "the art of a good man speaking well" and Jesus was the embodiment of his definition.[44]

Not only did Jesus embody the rhetorical triad, but his incarnation provided him the opportunity to humanly understand his audience in all its dimensions. Each of the gospels begin with the stunning details of how Christ condescended and entered humanity. John writes, "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:14). The creator of the world, came into the world; he who crafted man was made man and was manifest to humankind.[45] In the incarnation, God permitted "himself to be seen and to be a member of society, to live among people as one of them."[46] The Son of God willingly bent down to literally see eye-to-eye with others, in *their* likeness, as Jesus of Nazareth;

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[43] Matt 8:16; Mark 1:34, 4:35-41; John 11.

[44] Marcus Fabius Quintilianus, *Instiutio Oratoria,* trans. H. E. Butler (London: William Heinemann, 1920), 1:9, 11.

[45] Herman N. Ridderbos, *The Gospel according to John*, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 49. John continually emphasizes the astonishing reality of the God become man, who gave his life that men and women might have life. C. K. Barrett refers to John 13:1-20 as a "symbolic narrative," as the washing of disciples' feet demonstrates Jesus's incarnation and anticipates his crucifixion, the means by which men and women would be cleansed from sin. John uses the phrases "He laid aside" and "taking a towel, tied it around his waist" (13:4). In his humble service to the disciples, Jesus laid aside his outer garment and took up a towel to wash the disciple's feet, alluding to Jesus's lowering of himself through his incarnation and death for humanity. Jesus *laid aside* his divine rank by *taking up* humanity. Moreover, Jesus *laid aside* his life by *taking up* death, the ultimate descent (10:11). Jesus, the Son of God, lowered himself by taking on "the dress of a menial slave, dress that was looked down upon in both Jewish and Gentile circles" and he began to wash the dirtiest part of man, including men who would later deny and betray him (13:21-30, 18:15-27). The condescending kindness of God is that he stooped low, eventually unto death, to wash the filthiest part of man and call him "completely clean" (13:10). C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel according to St John* (London: SPCK, 1958), 363; Carson, *The Gospel according to John*, 260-61, 463; Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2013), 705.

[46] Ridderbos, *The Gospel according to John*, 51.

he became one who sympathizes with human weakness and temptations, one who became human to redeem the human race.[47] Charles Taber notes of Jesus's ministry, he made every "effort to understand and take seriously the specific context of each human group and person on its own terms and all its dimensions"; he used metaphors, stories, and language familiar to his audience to draw them into belief.[48] For example, when he spoke with those who were thirsty and hungry, Jesus referred to himself as "living water" and "the bread of life" to inform them he quenched spiritual thirst and hunger.[49] To a group of legalistic Pharisees and wayward Gentiles, he told a story about two sons to reveal their need to return home (Luke 15:11-32). In short, he personalized his words to meet the particular needs of people.[50]

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[47] In addition to the gospels, the sum of the New Testament is not shy in expressing both the deity *and* humanity of Christ. They are of the most important and distinguishable realities of the Christian faith; Jesus Christ, the God-man, sympathizes with the human race as a human and redeems the human race as a human. The writer of Hebrews explains, "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to in help in time of need" (4:15). The apostle John writes,

> That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us—that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you. (1 John 1:1-3)

Leon Morris comments, "The gospel is concerned not with some mythical figure like the shadowy forms in Green mysteries, but with a genuine historical person. He had been *heard* and *seen* and *touched*. . . . John is referring not to visions, but to physical existence." Leon Morris, *1 John*, The New Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids: IVP, 1994), 1399. Moreover, the apostle Paul writes, "Christ Jesus . . . who was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be the Son of God" (Rom 1:1-4). Douglas Moo comments, "What Paul is claiming . . . is that the preexistent Son, who entered into the human experience as the promised Messiah . . . Son of God from eternity, he becomes. . .'able [dynatai] for all time to save those who draw near to God through him.'" Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, The New International Commentary of the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 48-49. See also Col 1:15-20; Phil 2:6-7; Heb 1:3.

[48] Charles R. Taber, "Contextualization: Indigenization and/or Transformation," in *The Gospel and Islam: A 1978 Compendium*, ed. Don M. McCurry (Monrovia, CA: MARC, 1979), 144. See also John 1:1, Eph 1:21, Phil 2:9.

[49] John 4:10, 6:35, 7:27-28.

[50] Arguably one of the greatest examples of how Jesus personalized his words to meet the particular needs of people is seen in John 4:1-45, the story of the Samaritan woman at the well. In the pericope, a lone Jewish man and an unaccompanied Samaritan woman are seeking to draw water from the

Anticipating Restoration: God's Rhetoric Advanced

After Christ's resurrection, he commissioned the disciples, "As the Father sent me, even so I am sending you" (John 20:21).[51] Very simply, Christians are to pattern the manner in which Christ was sent into the world.[52] Guinness writes, "As God saw, so he sent, and as God sent, so we share. As God saw our sin, so he sent the Son, and as God

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same well. Simultaneously, though "Jews had no dealings with Samaritans" (John 4:8). Yet at the height of great social, cultural, and religious tension, Jesus engaged the woman by asking her for a drink (4:7). Taken aback, the woman wondered why a Jewish man was asking her, a Samaritan woman, for a drink. The woman contended, "You have nothing to draw water with" (4:8,11). The woman notes that Jesus had no jar with which to draw water and she knew that "Jews do not use dishes Samaritans have used." Carson, *The Gospel according to John*, 218-20. The woman clearly understood the social, cultural, and religious boundaries that Jesus had willingly breached by speaking with her. The unnamed Samaritan saw that Jesus had nothing to draw water with, and as a result his request for a drink implied that he would share from the same dish that she would use. Furthermore, Jesus insisted that he possessed a type of water that quenches thirst forever, unlike any physical water, and subsequently, the water that he possesses wells up in a person as "a spring of water welling up to eternal life" (4:14). However, mistaking spiritual living water for earthly running water (rather than stagnant well-water), the Samaritan inquired as to how and where she could acquire this kind of water. Though she does not understand, the Samaritan is intrigued, and it is at her request for this "living water" that John records one of the most remarkable, shocking, and abrupt narrative alterations of his gospel. Jesus commanded the woman, "Go, call your husband, and come here" (4:16). At once, after being struck with such a personal request, the woman rejected the notion: "I have no husband," she answered (4:17). Jesus's response is devastating, as he lays her sin to bare. Jesus *sees* the Samaritan woman beyond her social and cultural identity, and upon uncovering her sin, Jesus draws near to a woman ridden with isolation, guilt, and shame. Following additional inquiry by the woman and Jesus's subsequent explanation as Messiah, the woman "left her water jar" to invite others to "come, see" (4:28-29). The woman abandoned her jar, the very thing she thought she needed (water), and in turn becomes one of the earliest New Testament initiators and influencers of belief in Jesus, the living water, for "many Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman's testimony" (4:39). Jesus personalized his message to a woman of Samaria, and she in turn shared his message. See also Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to John*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 225-34; Donald Guthrie, *John*, The New Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids: IVP, 1994), 1033-34.

[51] Each of the gospels ends with Jesus's commission for the disciples (Matt 28:18-20), Mark 16:16-17, Luke 24:46-49, John 20:21). France writes, "What they [the gospels] offer are a portrait, rather four portraits, of Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God, in word and deed, and call to follow him in the way of salvation" and a call to invite others to follow him in the way of salvation by imitation of him. France, *Reading the Gospels*, 897. It should also be noted that some of the earliest manuscripts do not include Mark 16:9-20. I agree that Mark did not write or intend for 16:9-20 to be included in his gospel and support Mark Strauss's view that Mark intentionally leaves his reader to "decide how to respond [to the end of the gospel] . . . with faith or rejection," a predominant theme of the gospel. Mark L. Strauss, *Four Portraits, One Jesus: A Survey of Jesus and the Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 193.

[52] Guinness, *Fool's Talk*, 174.

sent his Son, so we share our faith."[53] As the Son of God was sent in humility, love, grace, truth, and gentleness, so must Christians be sent into the world.[54] Just as Jesus often reasoned with people through parables, metaphors, and questions, so too Christians should reason with others.[55]

In the redemptive narrative, the New Testament apostles carried the message of salvation to the world using the same rhetoric as Christ. The Apostle Paul boldly states the message of salvation must be presented without "obstacle[s] . . . by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, the Holy Spirit, genuine love; by truthful speech, and the power of God" (2 Cor 6:2, 3, 6, 7).[56] And, like Christ, Paul adapted his message to the particular needs of his audience: "to the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win the Jews . . . to the weak, I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel" (1 Cor 9:21-23).[57]

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[53] Guinness, *Fool's Talk*, 27.

[54] John 1:17; John 3:16; Matt 11:29; Phil 2:8.

[55] Luke 15; Matt 12:22-28, 13:1-20, 22:1-14; Mark 12:13-17.

[56] Colin G. Kruse makes a practical application of 2 Cor 6:1-10 when he writes,

> Paul insists that the way he has conducted his own ministry does not constitute a stumbling-block which might hinder their proper reception of the grace of God. Rather, in every way he has sought to commend himself a servant of God . . . no matter whether his experiences were pleasant or painful. . . . In all the ups and downs of life and ministry as Christians we need to act with integrity. If we do not, our own lives might become stumbling-blocks for those with whom we seek to share the gospel. (Colin G. Kruse, *2 Corinthians*, The New Bible Commentary [Grand Rapids: IVP, 1994], 1198)

[57] Regarding 1 Cor 9:21-23, Bruce Winter writes, "Like his Lord (Phil. 2:7-8), he [Paul] chose to be a slave to all so that he might win some for Christ. Paul is the cross-cultural missionary *par excellence* and no slave to evangelistic conventions. His adaptability is seen in his sensitivity when preaching . . . sensitivity to cultural context." Bruce Winter, *1 Corinthians*, The New Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids: IVP, 1994), 1176. Paul's interaction with the Athenians in Acts 17:16-34 is another chief example of Paul's sensitivity to cultural contexts, and serves as an example of 1 Cor 9:21-23 lived-out in his life. Chan writes,

> One of the best examples of gospel-cultural hermeneutics is found in Acts 17:16-34, when the Apostle Paul visits Athens. . . . In Athens the cultural texts were the idols, and these idols fulfilled the Athenians existential cry for transcendence. In their storyline, the Athenians wanted blessings from the gods, and the idols would appease the wrath of the gods. Notice how Paul empathizes with this desire: "I see that in every way you are very religious." Paul's understanding and empathy are evidence that Paul has entered their culture . . . he next challenges it: "You are ignorant of the very thing you worship." Paul describes to the Athenians their own storyline . . . they won't find their happy ending because they don't know the name of the Unknown God. Finally, Paul fulfills their storyline. He gives them Jesus as the happy ending that their cultural storyline is looking for. . . . He gives them Jesus as the

Significantly, the apostles considered themselves "ministers of reconciliation," ones who reasoned with others to lead them to believe the message of Christ's life, death, resurrection.[58] The Apostle Peter encouraged the church: "you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may *proclaim* the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light" (1 Pet 2:9, emphasis mine). Until the restoration of all things, Christians continue to be the voice of the gospel, to plead with loving humility, "be reconciled to God" (2 Cor 5:20).

Today, Christians are to continue speaking the gospel in a similar fashion by combining logos, pathos, and ethos with an understanding of their audience. Ward writes, "human language is the essential medium by which God acts in relation to us and presents himself to us in the offer of a covenant relationship with him in Christ."[59] In other words, the voice of Christians is the primary means God uses to push his gospel forward to the world, and, because this is so, it is imperative to determine whether Christians are being faithful to the rhetorical telos for which they have been called, namely among secularists.[60]

> Unknown God that they want to worship, but whose name they do not know. The Unknown God can now be the Known God" (Sam Chan, *Evangelism in a Skeptical World: How to Make the Unbelievable News about Jesus More Believable* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2018], 158-59)

Professor of New Testament at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Terry L. Wilder, adds of Paul's encounter with the Athenians, "He took advantage of the Athenians' knowledge of an anonymous altar he had come across while in their city and used their acknowledgement of an unknown God to enlighten their ignorance. . . . Christ followers engaged in missions and evangelism ought also to look for similar items to pique the interest of their hearers." Terry L. Wilder, "A Biblical Theology of Contextualization," *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 55, no. 1 (2012): 10.

[58] Acts 17:2, 7, 18:4, 19, 19:8-9, 22:30, 24:25.

[59] Ward, *Words of Life*, 43.

[60] Matt 28:18-20; Acts 1:8. In reference to Rom 10:13-17, Thomas R. Schreiner notes the severity of Christians' faithfulness to the rhetorical telos for which they have been called:

> The in-breaking eschatological salvation that is proclaimed by God's messengers (Rom. 10:15; Isa. 53:7) focuses on God's son, who has inaugurated the age to come by virtue of his death and resurrection. Thus, the saving proclamation of the gospel always involves the proclamation of Jesus our Lord, who died for our sins and was raised from the dead. . . . [Rom 10:14-17] excludes the idea that salvation can be obtained apart from the external hearing of the gospel . . . people are not saved apart from the preaching of the gospel. It is this conviction that has driven the missionary impulse

Secularism and Christian Response

"Where is God gone?" Frederick Nietzsche asked. "God is dead! God remains dead! And we have killed him."[61]

Following in the footsteps of Nietzsche, authors like Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, and Sam Harris have popularized secularism, claiming that it is "humanity's liberation from the delusion that it is controlled by a power higher than itself."[62] Secularism, writes Phil Zuckerman, is "predicated on a this-wordly ethos . . . the here and now, people and nature, life and existence"; it commits exclusively to what is observable, and according to Pew Research, roughly forty-six million Americans identify as secular, the highest in U.S. history.[63]

This section will begin with a review of the literature describing secularists' assessments of and most notable objections to the Christian faith. A review of the literature detailing how Christians use rhetoric to address those objections will follow.

Secularists' Objections to Christianity

Secularists' objections to Christianity are well documented. Armin Navabi writes, "[The Bible is] inconsistent and inaccurate."[64] God is "either impotent, evil, or

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throughout history." (Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998], 567-68)

[61] Frederick Nietzsche, *The Gay Science,* trans. Thomas Common (Mineola, NY: Dover, 1910), 90.

[62] Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Boston: First Mariner Books, 2008), 27-28.

[63] Phil Zuckerman, *Living the Secular Life: New Answers to Old Questions* (New York: Penguin Books, 2015), 13; Cary Funk and Greg Smith, "'Nones' on the Rise: One-in-Five Adults Have No Religious Affiliation," *Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion & Public Life*, October 9, 2012, https://www.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/7/2012/10/NonesOnTheRise-full.pdf, 9.

[64] Armin Navabi, *Why There Is No God: Simple Responses to 20 Common Arguments for the Existence of God* (Vancouver, Canada: Atheist Republic, 2014), 20.

non-existent."[65] Christopher Hitchens adds, "Religion poisons everything."[66] And perhaps most famously, Richard Dawkins writes,

> The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sado-masochistic, capriciously malevolent bully. . . . It is unfair to attack such an easy target.[67]

Dan Barker not only agrees with the above, but writes, "Dawkins was too kind"; finding Dawkins's quote insufficient, Barker goes on to add "pyromaniacal, angry, merciless, curse hurling, vaccicidal, aborticidal, cannibalistic, slavemonger" in describing God's ethos.[68] While Dawkins and Barker make disparaging remarks regarding the character of God, Michael Onfray writes witheringly of his followers, "I do not despise believers. I find them neither ridiculous nor pathetic, but I lose all hope when I see that they prefer the comforting fairy tales of children to the cruel hard facts of adults. . . . Religion is a fabric woven with fictions and metaphysical placebos."[69]

While the aforementioned may be disconcerting to a Christian reader, not all secularists' responses are as contentious. Zuckerman, professor of secularism at Pitzer College and professed atheist writes, "I didn't agree with Christopher Hitchens when he acerbically proclaimed that religion 'poisons everything.' No way. Religion provides so much sustenance, support, inspiration, and hope for millions of people every day."[70]

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[65] Navabi, *Why There Is No God,* 30.

[66] Christopher Hitchens, *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (New York: Hatchett Book, 2009), 13.

[67] Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 51.

[68] Dan Barker, *God: The Most Unpleasant Character in All Fiction* (New York: Sterling, 2016), i-ii.

[69] Michael Onfray, *Atheist Manifesto: The Case against Christianity, Judaism, and Islam*, trans. Jeremy Leggatt (New York: Arcade Publishing, 2005), 1, 37-38.

[70] Zuckerman, *Living the Secular Life*, 223.

Moreover, many secularists are open to dialogue with Christians and, with sincerity, are asking questions like: *If there is a God, why has he made it so hard to find him? How could there only be one true faith? How can you believe in a good God if he allows such terrible suffering? Why are Christians anti-LGBT? Why are Christians so hypocritical? How can a good God send people that he created, and loves, to Hell? How can you trust the Bible and take it literally?*[71] The Christian response to these questions has been to create a body of literature that attempts to make a loving and respectful defense of the faith in the hope that people might come to believe.

Christian Rhetorical Response to Secularists' Objections

Guinness writes, "It is said rightly, 'love is the final apologetic,' in the sense that our best argument is our love for the people we talk to. But that is not the end of the insistence on love. Love is the 'alpha and the omega of apologetics,' in the sense that all we say must come from love, and it must lead to love and to the One who is love."[72]

The Christian rhetorician is cognizant he or she cannot *make* another person see the beauty of the Bible or love the person of Jesus Christ. Nonetheless, his or her hope is that, if these things are presented beautifully and marinated in love, the hearer may eventually come to love them as well. And, in an effort to make this hope a reality, Christians have created a body of literature that addresses both the *what* and *how* of Christian rhetorical response. Works addressing the *what* of Christian response use the logos, pathos, and ethos of Scripture's metanarrative to respond to secularists' objections. In contrast, works addressing the *how* of Christian response most commonly address the

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[71] Many of the questions listed were adapted from Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism* (New York: Dutton, 2008), 3, 22, 52, 101. Keller explores the most common questions of those who do not believe in the Christian faith, including secularists. See also Ravi Zacharias, *The End of Reason: A Response to the New Atheists* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008); Tim Muehlhoff and Richard Langer, *Winsome Persuasion: Christian Influence in a Post-Christian World* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2017), 153-74.

[72] Guinness, *Fool's Talk*, 45.

need for contextualization and/or advocate the use of storytelling as seen throughout Scripture. And, while written works typically focus on either the *what* or *how* of response, these aspects of response, though distinct, are tightly intertwined and should not be considered mutually exclusive categories. Therefore, both aspects are considered.

Among written works devoted to the *what* of Christian rhetorical response, Timothy Keller's use of logos, pathos, and ethos to candidly respond to secularists' objections to the Christian faith serves as a model. Seeking to persuade skeptics about the person and work of Jesus Christ, Keller responds to their strongest objections to Christianity in a winsome and logical manner.[73] He, along with other writers like Ravi Zacharias, Lee Strobel, Francis Schaeffer, and Nancy Pearcey take secularists' objections seriously and speak and/or write to them in a way that provides them with an opportunity to see truth.[74] And, while these writers may peripherally address the *how* of Christian rhetorical response, their emphasis is clear—to provide the content, the *what*, found in Scripture's metanarrative to meet secularists' objections.

In the literature addressing the *how* of Christian rhetorical response, there are two recurrent ideas; storytelling and contextualization. For example, Tim Muehlhoff and Richard Langer, along with Holly Ordway, encourage Christians to use story in their responses to secularists' objections. Muehlhoff and Langer advocate that Christians share the gospel with secularists by combining pathos as detailed in Augustine's *On Christian*

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[73] Timothy Keller, *Making Sense of God: An Invitation to the Skeptical* (New York: Viking, 2016); Keller, *The Reason for God.*

[74] Ravi Zacharias and Vince Vitale, *Jesus among Secular Gods: The Countercultural Claims of Christ* (New York: FaithWords, 2017); Ravi Zacharias, *The End of Reason: A Response to the New Atheists* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008); Nancy Pearcey, *Finding Truth: 5 Principles for Unmasking Atheism, Secularism, and Other God Substitutes* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2015). See also Randy Newman, *Questioning Evangelism: Engaging People's Hearts the Way Jesus Did*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2017).

Doctrine—with the power and imagery of storytelling.[75] Ordway, a former atheist, urges her readers to present the gospel to skeptics through story, suggesting that reason (logos) is contingent upon one's imagination. She writes, "Good stories and poetry help us to see more clearly" and, in support of this assertion, she uses the stories of another former atheist, C. S. Lewis, and J. R. R. Tolkein to explain the gospel.[76] Ordway summarizes her rationale for story as follows: "People think they know who Jesus is, what the church is, what it means to have faith . . . and they think it's boring, or stupid, or irrelevant. We need to help people recover a fresh view of the truth—to see Jesus for the first time, and really see him; to actually see the reality of sin, and the beauty and brokenness of the world."[77]

Meanwhile, others like Caleb Crider et al., Taber, and Sam Chan address the need for Christians to contextualize their response.[78] Taber argues that Christian evangelism must make every "effort to understand and take seriously the specific context of each human group and person on its own terms and all its dimensions."[79] More concisely, Chan encourages Christians to contextualize their message, to present the gospel in a way that reflects an understanding of their audience.[80]

The objective of Christian rhetorical response should be biblical imitation and such imitation necessitates that both the *what* and *how*, as revealed through Scripture's metanarrative, shape the response. Furthermore, it is in this shaping that the connection

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[75] Muehlhoff and Langer, *Winsome Persuasion,* 91, 97-98, 115-16. See also Chan, *Evangelism in a Skeptical World*, 173-86.

[76] Ordway, *Apologetics and the Christian Imagination*, 17, 89.

[77] Ordway, *Apologetics and the Christian Imagination*, 88.

[78] For reading on contextualization, see Taber, "Contextualization"; Caleb Crider et al., *Tradecraft: For the Church on Mission* (Louisville: Upstream Collective, 2017), 156-69; Chan, *Evangelism in a Skeptical World*, 129-72.

[79] Taber, "Contextualization."

[80] Chan, *Evangelism in a Skeptical World*, 129-56.

between the *what* and *how* of Christian response is most easily understood. While the truth(s) of Scripture's metanarrative never changes, the manner in which the truth is shared does change based upon a familiarity with the audience.

Guinness synthesizes the thoughts of Muehlhoff, Langer, and Ordway with Crider, Taber, and Chan:

> To be sure, stories are at the heart of the biblical view of creative persuasion, but not at the expense of reason or argument. . . . This is one reason why C.S. Lewis has had such an enduring appeal. At times he was coolly rational, as in *Mere Christianity,* while at other times he engaged the imagination brilliantly, as in *The Screwtape Letters* or *The Chronicles of Narnia*. There is a time for stories, and there is a time for rational arguments, and the skill we need lies in knowing which to use, and when.[81]

In other words, the manner in which the unchanging story is told is contingent upon contextualization. And, if Christians are to shape their storytelling for a generation of thoroughly secular young adults, they must have a deep understanding of that generation.

Generation Z, Secularism, and Christian Rhetoric

Gen Z consists of individuals born between 1995 and 2015.[82] These individuals are inclusive, entrepreneurial, diligent, and independent, yet they also resist traditional identity markers and embrace moment-by-moment desires that are religiously, sexually and relationally fluid.[83] While Gen Z has a deep desire for mutual intimacy, it is

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[81] Guinness, *Fool's Talk*, 34.

[82] Exact dates as to what constitutes Generation Z differ. According to White, Generation Z begins with the freshman class of 2015 (born no later than 1997), though the author concedes that due to indeterminate dates, those born in 1995 and following may also be included in the generation. James Emery White, *Meet Generation Z: Understanding and Reaching the New Post-Christian World* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2017), 37-38.

[83] Deep Patel, "8 Ways Generation Z Will Differ from Millennials in the Workplace," *Forbes*, September 21, 2017, https://www.forbes.com/sites/deeppatel/2017/09/21/8-ways-generation-z-will-differ-from-millennials-in-the-workplace/ - 19789ef776e5; Susan Tjarksen, "Gen Z Is Ready to Rent: How to Reach the Post Millennial Generation," *Forbes*, July 20, 2018, https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbesrealestatecouncil/2018/07/20/gen-z-is-ready-to-rent-how-to-reach-the-post-millennial-generation/ - 4ee6405933c6.

nonetheless identified as the loneliest generation in history.[84] And Gen Z is not just lonely; it is a generation the literature repeatedly describes as struggling to find a true sense of identity and an authentic sense of belonging.[85] It is a generation longing to be known and loved. However, this is also a generation that resists the gospel message of Jesus Christ, the very thing that will satisfy these longings, while simultaneously adopting a thoroughly secular worldview.[86]

The section will begin with a review of literature that provides a better understanding of the population of interest. This will be followed with a review of literature devoted to contextualizing the gospel of Jesus Christ to reach Gen Z.

Five Characteristics of Generation Z

Although there are many ways Gen Z could be described, there are five characteristics referenced routinely throughout the literature that distinguish Gen Z from previous generations: (1) racial and ethnic diversity, (2) gender and sexual fluidity, (3) pervasive use of social media, (4) access to and use of pornography, and (5) lack of spiritual affiliation.[87]

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[84] Behavorial Health, "2018 Cigna Loneliness Index: Survey of 20,000 Americans Examining Behaviors Driving Loneliness in the United States," Cigna, 2018, https://www.multivu.com/players/English/8294451-cigna-us-loneliness-survey/docs/IndexReport_1524069371598-173525450.pdf, 6.

[85] White, *Meet Generation Z*, 46-48. See also Jean M. Twenge, *iGen: Why Today's Super Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy—and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood* (New York: Atria Books, 2017), 227-40.

[86] See Barna Group, "Atheism Doubles among Generation Z," January 24, 2018, https://www.barna.com/research/atheism-doubles-among-generation-z/; Funk and Smith, "'Nones' on the Rise," 33.

[87] The five predominant characteristics of Gen Z mentioned in this section come from Barna Group, *Gen Z: The Culture, Beliefs, and Motivations Shaping the Next Generation* (Ventura, CA: Barna Group and Impact 360 Institute, 2018); Seemilar and Grace, *Generation Z Goes to College*; White, *Meet Generation Z*; Twenge, *iGen.*

Gen Z: Racial and ethnic diversity. Gen Z is the most racially and ethnically diverse generation in American history. James Emery White reports, "There has been a 400 percent increase in black-white multiracial marriages in the last thirty years and a 1,000 percent increase in Asian-white marriages. Overall, multiracial children are the fastest growing youth group in the United States."[88] While research indicates that Gen Z personifies social inclusiveness and acceptance more than any previous generation, recent studies also indicate that diversity in Gen Z, though "acceptable," is not the most "desirable."[89] In other words, Jean Twenge writes, "the average iGen [synonymous for Gen Z] teen tolerates diversity but is not sure it's the ideal system."[90]

Consequently, it is not surprising that current research on biracial/multiracial students suggests a unique struggle to form an identity, accompanied by strong feelings of confusion about where he or she "fits" in society.[91] For example, in Fischer-Kinney's study of biracial/multiracial students' perceptions, one participant recalled "students pulling her hair and asking—'is it real?'" along with the repetitive question, "'What are you?'"[92] Moreover, biracial students expressed feelings of self-betrayal connected to their racial identity; if the individual perceives that only one part of his or her racial identity is

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[88] White, *Meet Generation Z*, 45-46. See also Sparks and Honey, "Meet Generation Z: Forget Everything You Learned about Millennials," June 17, 2014, https://www.slideshare.net/sparksandhoney/generation-z-final-june-17.

[89] Twenge, *iGen*, 244.

[90] Twenge, *iGen*, 244.

[91] Barna Group, *Gen Z*, 12; White, *Meet Generation Z*, 46. For biracial/multiracial identity confusion, see Julie A. Fischer-Kinney, "Biracial/Multiracial Student Perceptions of Student Academic Support Services at a Predominantly White Public Institution" (PhD diss., The University of Toledo, 2012), 17-20. See also K. A. Renn, *Mixed Race Students in College: The Ecology of Race, Identity, and Community* (New York: SUNY Press, 2004); K. A. Renn, "Research on Biracial and Multiracial Identity Development: Overview and Synthesis," *New Directions for Student* 123 (2008): 13-21.

[92] Fischer-Kinney, "Biracial/Multiracial Student Perceptions," 128.

accepted by a particular group, he or she may feel compelled to reject other parts of their identity.[93]

Gen Z: Gender and sexual fluidity. Generally speaking, Gen Z considers gender and sexuality central components of personal identity and believes individuals should be freed from traditional gender and sexual boundaries.[94] For example, according to Barna, roughly one-third of Gen Z's young adults reported that "gender is what a person feels like" rather than biological sex, and 45 percent believed they would feel neutrally about a peer who was questioning or considering changing his or her gender.[95] Regarding sexuality, Barna reported that approximately one-eighth of thirteen to eighteen-year-olds identified as something other than heterosexual, and Twenge reported that same sex experiences have tripled since the 1990s.[96] According to Twenge, "Overall, the large increase in bisexual experience suggests that many people are having sex with both men and women without necessarily identifying as gay, lesbian, or bisexual."[97] In short, for Gen Z, there is no norm in regard to gender and sexuality, making their identity "deeply unsettling."[98]

Gen Z: Use of social media. Gen Z lives are dominated by social media, which provides a world of convenient, immediate, and constant digital communication.[99]

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[93] Fischer-Kinney, "Biracial/Multiracial Student Perceptions," 126-27. See also Barna Group, *Gen Z*, 32.

[94] Barna Group, *Gen Z*, 46. See also White, *Meet Generation Z*, 46-48; Twenge, *iGen*, 227-40.

[95] Barna Group, *Gen Z*, 46.

[96] Barna Group, *Gen Z*, 46-47. See also Twenge, *iGen*, 233.

[97] Twenge, *iGen*, 233.

[98] Barna Group, *Gen Z*, 29.

[99] White, *Meet Generation Z*, 42, 44-45. See also Seemilar and Grace, *Generation Z Goes to College*, 65-81; Barna Group, *Gen Z*, 16; Twenge, *iGen*, 54.

While "connected" to one another more than any generation, the members of Gen Z nonetheless describe social media as "addictive," "hollow," and "lonely."[100] Barna reports,

> Despite the promise of connection, social media exacerbates loneliness and dislocation . . . social encounters are documented online so relentlessly. Those who aren't invited are keenly aware, through social media, of what is happening without them, leading to feelings of exclusion and loneliness. Those who post are also affected, anxiously waiting for the affirmation of comments and "likes."[101]

Loneliness reigns in Gen Z and, alarmingly, as face-to-face contact declines, suicide, the ultimate expression of loneliness and isolation, is on the rise.[102] Twenge reports, "Teens who spend three hours a day or more on electronic devices are 35 percent more likely to have a risk factor for suicide, such as making a suicide plan . . . for the first time in 24 years, the teen suicide rate was higher than the teen homicide rate."[103] Gen Z's pervasive use of social media and the resulting loneliness and isolation indicate a need for mutual intimacy and genuine community.

Gen Z: Access to and use of pornography. The combination of wireless communication and pocket access to the internet means that pornography is always available to Gen Z. Research indicates, "Seventy percent of all eighteen-to-thirty-four-year-olds are regular viewers" of pornography, with age *eleven* being the average age of first-time viewing.[104] White notes that use of pornography, which both genders share,

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[100] Twenge, *iGen*, 56-57, 77-79.

[101] Barna Group, *Gen Z*, 19.

[102] Twenge, *iGen*, 79

[103] Jean M. Twenge, "Have Smartphones Destroyed a Generation?" *The Atlantic*, September 2017, https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/09/has-the-smartphone-destroyed-a-generation/534198/. Moreover, the suicide rate among teens increased by 46 percent from 2007 to 2015. Twenge, *iGen*, 77-88.

[104] White, *Meet Generation Z*, 58-61; Sparks and Honey, "Meet Generation Z." See also David Kinnaman, "The Porn Phenomenon," Barna, February 5, 2016, https://www.barna.com/the-porn-phenomenon/.

"may be the greatest area of immorality inflicted on and pursued by Generation Z."[105] Barna agrees, "Instead of being formed and disciplined by their parents, screenagers are increasingly shaped by the media (This is especially true of pornography, which is shaping sexual norms and expectations in radical ways.)."[106] Unfortunately, although pornography promises to provide intimacy, it has actually led to increased feelings of detachment, loneliness, and isolation in Gen Z.

Gen Z: Lack of religious affiliation. Research reveals that Gen Z is the most spiritually illiterate generation in history; White writes, "they do not know the basics of Christian belief or theology," and they do not care to know.[107] Gen Z is the first post-Christian generation, and White adds, "the very memory of the gospel is becoming nonexistent" among them.[108] For example, when Barna researchers asked Gen Z faith-based questions like, "Who was Jesus?" the repeated response was, "I don't know; I'm so confused."[109] Moreover, Gen Z makes up the largest and fastest growing "religious" group in the western world, the religiously unaffiliated, or "nones."[110] White writes, "[Gen Z] will come to typify the new reality of a post-Christian world. As the first truly post-Christian generation, and numerically the largest, Generation Z will be the most influential religious force in the West and the heart of the missional challenge facing the

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[105] White, *Meet Generation Z*, 60.

[106] Barna Group, *Gen Z*, 35.

[107] White, *Meet Generation Z*, 46-47, 131-32; Barna Group, *Gen Z*; James Emery White, *Rise of the Nones: Understanding and Reaching the Religiously Unaffiliated* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2014), 21-28. David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, *Good Faith: Being a Christian When Society Thinks You're Irrelevant and Extreme* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2017), 21.

[108] White, *Rise of the Nones*, 43. See also White, *Meet Generation Z*, 109; Barna Group, *Gen Z*, 36.

[109] Barna Group, *Gen Z*, 28.

[110] White, *Meet Generation Z*, 21-22.

Christian church."[111] Support for White's observations comes in the form of a 2018 Barna study which found that 8 percent of Gen Z identifies as agnostic, 14 percent identifies as "none," and 13 percent identifies as atheist, double that of other generations.[112]

Based upon their frequency in the literature, these are the five characteristics that distinguish Gen Z from previous generations, and in the section to follow, literature seeking to better contextualize the gospel of Jesus Christ for this generation is surveyed.

Meeting Generation Z's Need for the Gospel

Though a myriad of respectable Christian blogs, magazines, and news websites discuss how to reach Gen Z with the gospel of Jesus Christ, the vast majority are predicated on the work of White.[113] He writes, "it is abundantly clear that approaches to evangelism used in the past must be ruthlessly reevaluated in light of the nature of a post Christian culture and the generation it has spawned."[114] While earlier generations were mostly churched and affiliated with certain denominations or religions, Gen Z is not.[115]

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[111] White, *Meet Generation Z*, 11.

[112] Barna Group, *Gen Z*, 25.

[113] The following is a list of Christian blogs, magazines, and news websites regarding how to reach Gen Z with the gospel, but due to both academic reasons and ample use of *Meet Generation Z* by James Emery White, the following were not included in the body of this work: Jonathan Merritt, "Forget Millennials: How Will the Church Reach Generation Z?" Religion News Service, May 1, 2017, https://religionnews.com/2017/05/01/forget-millennials-how-will-churches-reach-generation-z/; Jaquelle Crowe, "Meet Generation Z," The Gospel Coalition, January 27, 2017, https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/reviews/meet-generation-z/; Mark Woods, "Gen Z Show the Way: Why Evangelism Doesn't Have to be a Battle," *Christianity Today*, July 13, 2018, https://www.christiantoday.com/article/gen-z-shows-the-way-why-evangelism-doesnt-have-to-be-a-battle/129975.htm; Brandon Showalter, "Strategies for Reaching Gen Z Not Working, We Must Equip Teens to 'Engage Not Enrage': Evangelist," *CP Church & Ministries*, February 2018, https://www.christianpost.com/news/strategies-reaching-gen-z-not-working-we-must-equip-teens-engage-not-enrage-evangelist-215808/.

[114] White, *Meet Generation Z*, 63.

[115] White, *Meet Generation Z*, 63.

As a result, Gen Z is not only resistant to evangelistic techniques, but these techniques are largely unintelligible because the generation lacks familiarity with important biblical language.[116] For example, when Christians use evangelistic techniques packed with important terms and phrases like "trinity," "image of God," "sinful," "holy," "glory," "repentance," "redemption," "reconciliation," and "justification;" the recipient hears but does not understand.[117] For example, a Christian may share, "for the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord," but the message is lost because the words lack meaning for the listener (Rom 6:23).[118]

In response to this biblical illiteracy, the small volume of literature devoted to reaching Gen Z suggests that Christian rhetoric must contain stories and pictures, God's inclusiveness of the nations, sympathetic imagination, contextualization, and questions concerning the universe and the existence of God.[119] But, is this what Christians are doing? Christians cannot be certain unless they ask members of Gen Z what, exactly, they hear Christians saying.

Conclusion

The data from several recent studies identifies two trends. First, the number of college students within Gen Z who identify as secular is increasing. A 2013 Trinity College study of 1,873 college students in twenty-seven states found that nearly 30 percent identified as "secular."[120] The study also found that 37 percent of those who

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[116] White, *Meet Generation Z*, 113.

[117] Ordway, *Apologetics and the Christian Imagination,* 27.

[118] Ordway, *Apologetics and the Christian Imagination,* 5, 8.

[119] White, *Meet Generation Z*, 107-28.

[120] Barry A. Kosmin and Ariela Keysar, "Religious, Spiritual and Secular: The Emergence of Three Distinct Worldviews among American College Students," *American Religious Identification Survey at Trinity College*, September 2013, https://www.trincoll.edu/Academics/centers/isssc/Documents/ARIS_2013_College%20Students_Sept_25_final_draft.pdf, 11.

identified as "secular" attended church weekly in their youth.[121] And, in a similar study, David Kinnaman learned that, while American teenagers are among the most religiously active, American twentysomethings are the least religiously active.[122]

Other studies identify the second trend; increasingly negative perceptions of Christians and their message. A 2016 Barna study reported that 43 percent of non-Christians said their evangelistic experience "made them glad not to be a Christian."[123] Meanwhile, a subsequent study by Kinnaman and Lyons, found that two of the most common adjectives to describe Christians and their message are "irrelevant" and "extreme."[124]

In summary, the research reveals the following: despite exposure to Christian rhetoric, college students are increasingly identifying as secular and describe Christians and their message more and more negatively. However, existing research has not explored *what* Christian rhetoric is contributing to these findings and *how* it is doing so.

The proposed study will use a phenomenological methodology to provide an answer to these questions. Specifically, the proposed study will seek to answer the following question, "What are secular, Gen Z college students' perceptions of their experiences with the phenomenon of Christian rhetoric?" The methodology for achieving this objective follows in chapter 3.

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[121] Kosmin and Keysar, "Religious, Spiritual and Secular," 11.

[122] David Kinnaman and Aly Hawkins, *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians Are Leaving the Church . . . and Rethinking Faith* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011), 22.

[123] Barna Group, "Perceptions of Jesus, Christians, and Evangelism in the UK," February 10, 2016, https://www.barna.com/research/perceptions-of-jesus-christians-evangelism-in-the-uk/.

[124] Kinnaman and Lyons, *Good Faith*, 21.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In *Evangelism in a Skeptical World,* Sam Chan introduces "Gospel-Cultural Hermeneutics," which is an approach to evangelism modeled on the Apostle Paul's encounter with the Athenians in Acts 17:16-34.[1] Just as Paul intentionally contextualized his message for the Athenians, Chan encourages his readers to (1) read the culture, (2) describe it, (3) understand it, (4) empathize with it, (5) deconstruct it, (6) consider how the gospel answers the "existential cry and storyline" of the culture, and (7) speak the gospel.[2]

Chapter 2 revealed that college students are increasingly identifying as secular and describing Christians and their message in an increasingly negative manner. In an effort to better understand secular college students' experiences with Christian rhetoric, a phenomenological study was proposed. Therefore, chapter 3 will focus on the research methodology planned to read, describe, understand, empathize with, deconstruct, consider how the gospel meets the culture's needs, and speak the gospel among them. The following methodological approach for this study will include research purpose, design overview, population and sample, delimitations, limitations of generalization, instrumentation, and procedures.

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[1] Sam Chan, *Evangelism in a Skeptical World: How to Make the Unbelievable News about Jesus More Believable* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2018), 158.

[2] Chan, *Evangelism in a Skeptical World*, 158-66.

Research Purpose

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand how secular, Gen Z, college students have experienced the phenomenon of Christian rhetoric. In an effort to increase understanding of participants' experiences with the phenomenon, open-ended questions were used. Additionally, participants were asked to provide any other personal materials they deem applicable to the study.[3] Once data was gathered, coded, and analyzed, it will be interpreted and used to shape Christian rhetorical praxis with the study's population.

Research Questions Synopsis

The following research questions directed the study:

1. What are secular students' perceptions of their experiences with the phenomenon of Christian rhetoric?

Sub Questions

1. What role do the elements of logos, including choice of language and reason, play in secular students' perceptions of Christian rhetoric?
2. What role do the elements of pathos, including sympathetic imagination, inquiry, and openness play in secular students' perceptions of Christian rhetoric?[4]
3. What role do the elements of ethos, including trustworthiness, attentiveness, and decorum play in secular students' perceptions of Christian rhetoric?
4. What role does understanding one's audience play in secular students' perceptions of Christian rhetoric?

Design Overview

The study used a qualitative, hermeneutic phenomenological methodology to answer the following question: "What are secular students' perceptions of their

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[3] John Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing among Five Approaches*, 3rd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2013), 81; Johnny Saldaña, *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*, 3rd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2016), 3-4.

[4] While the research sub question used the term sympathetic imagination, findings revealed participants longed for empathetic imagination. Hence, empathetic imagination was used in the analysis of findings. See chap. 4, pp. 78-80 for further explanation.

experiences with the phenomenon of Christian rhetoric?"

The population of interest consisted of secular, undergraduate college students within Gen Z who attend a Texas university with a Secular Student Alliance (SSA). A sequence of purposive criterion sampling followed by purposive random sampling were used to produce a sample of ten participants and two types of data were sought from each of the participants: audio recordings from face-to-face interviews and data consisting of any additional content the participant considers relevant to the study and wishes to contribute. Data was subjected to first and second cycle coding methods in an effort to extract significant statements and themes so that textual, structural, and essential, invariant structures could be identified.

The study concluded with an interpretive summary that will recommend best practices for Christian rhetoricians in their efforts to reach secular students within Gen Z with the gospel of Jesus Christ.[5]

Population

The population for this study consisted of undergraduate members of the Secular Student Alliance on university campuses in Texas, born no earlier than 1995. The population was identified using the SSA public website data.[6]

Sample

A two-step sampling process was used to reduce the population to ten participants. The sampling process yielded two participants from each of the five SSA's selected.

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[5] Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design*, 78-79.

[6] The Secular Student Alliance, "Find a Chapter," accessed February 18, 2019, https://secularstudents.org/find-a-chapter/.

Purposive Criterion Sampling

To be considered for the study, the secular organization must have been an official chapter of the Secular Student Alliance on a university campus in Texas. According to SSA, there are fourteen universities who met the abovementioned criteria.[7] Using the contact information listed on the SSA national website, each of the fourteen SSA's were emailed and invited to participate in the study. The first five SSA's willing to commit to the study were selected.[8]

Purposive Random Sampling

With purposive criterion sampling completed, a purposive random sampling was performed (see figure 1, page 46).[9] This sampling phase utilized a roster of willing participants supplied by each SSA and each roster consisted of potential participants meeting the following criteria:

1. Must be enrolled as an undergraduate at the selected university.
2. Cannot be born prior to 1995.
3. Must identify as a member of the Secular Student Alliance.[10]

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[7] The Secular Student Alliance, "Find a Chapter." The list used for this study was accessed on February 18, 2019, and is subject to change over time.

[8] If the initial contact did not yield five willing SSA's within seven days, a follow up email was sent. If the second contact did not yield a total of five willing SSA's within seven days, a third email was sent. If the third contact did not yield a total of five willing SSA's within seven days, the number of selected participants from willing SSA's was increased until a proper number of participants (5-25) for a phenomenology was met. See Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design,* 81.

[9] Purposive sampling was used for this study as it "yield[ed] the most information about the topic under investigation," namely secular students' perceptions of Christian rhetoric in Gen Z. Paul D. Leedy and Jeanne Ellis Ormrod, *Practical Research: Planning and Design*, 11th global ed. (Harlow, England: Pearson, 2015), 280.

[10] According to the Campus Organizer of SSA, Julienne De Guzman,

> A member of SSA is attending weekly/bi-weekly meetings held by the student officers who lead the chapter(s) and the amount of activity and participation they put into being part of the group. . . . Each chapter has a different definition for what they consider a member to be active or inactive. BUT as long as students (new and old) attend meetings, have given a means of being contacted via Facebook, email or phone number to receive notice of chapter activities and events, they are counted as a member." (Julienne De Guzman, email message to author, December 12, 2018)

4. Must have experienced the phenomenon of Christian rhetoric. For the purposes of the study, the experience(s) require(s) conversation involving Christian truth claims and the conversation must meet one or both of the following criterion:

   a. One-on-one conversation with a Christian who attempts to persuade the participant that Christian truth claims are credible.

   b. Conversations with groups consisting of less than ten people in which one or more members of the group attempt to persuade the participant that Christian truth claims are credible.

The following do not meet the criterion for experiencing the phenomenon of Christian rhetoric in this study:

   a. Conversations with one of more Christians which do not include Christian truth claims.

   b. Attending a church service(s), event(s), and/or function(s) without subsequent conversation including Christian truth claims with one of more Christians.

   c. Attending a campus ministry service(s), event(s), and/or function(s) without subsequent conversation including Christian truth claims with one of more Christians.

   d. Street preaching.

   e. Groups of more than ten people.

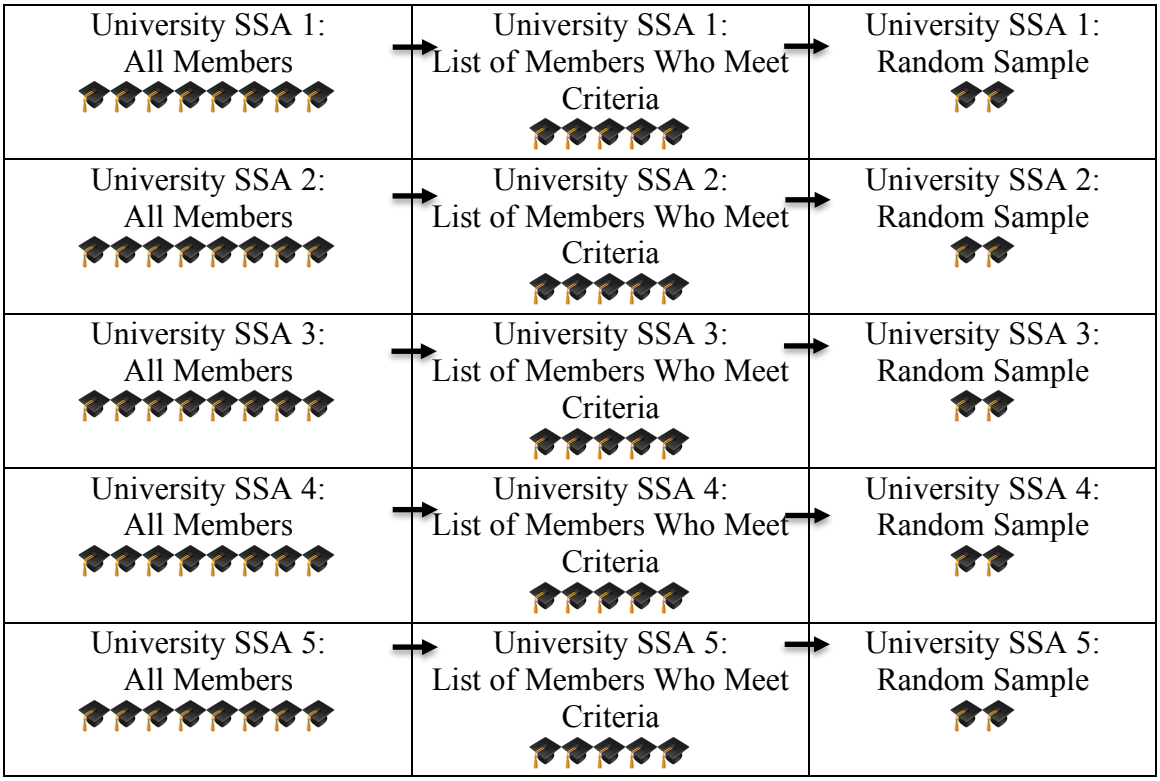

Figure 1. Purposive random sampling

Once each university's SSA supplied a roster consisting of willing participants meeting the aforementioned criteria and their contact information, a random number generator was used to select two students from each university.

Delimitations

Since the study combined a phenomenological methodology with purposive random sampling, the following delimitations applied:

1. The research was delimited to university campuses within the geographic boundaries of the state of Texas.[11]

2. The research was delimited to members of the SSA.[12]

3. The research was delimited to undergraduate students in Gen Z, born no earlier than 1995.[13]

4. The research was delimited to those who have experienced the phenomenon of Christian rhetoric as previously defined.

5. The research was delimited to the participating sample.[14]

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[11] Texas contains the largest number of SSA's in the Bible Belt, which may increase likelihood of exposure to Christian rhetoric. For example, in Shannon Carter's, "Living Inside the Bible Belt," she details her exposure to Christian rhetoric as a professor of English at Texas A & M University-Commerce. She writes,

> Teaching and writing in the Bible Belt for the past five years has taught me a number of things. Most significantly, perhaps . . . the limits of my own tolerance for difference. In fact, the evangelical Christianity with which a number of my students most identify functions—rhetorically, ideologically, practically—in ways that appear completely and irreconcilably at odds with my pedagogical and scholarly goals . . . the goal of "witnessing talk" or "testimonial" appears to be quite the opposite: to "convert" the listener to the speaker's ways of knowing and living, a conversion completely dependent upon the acceptance that the speaker's own subject position is far from "partial" or "socially situated" but rather universal, right, and—above all—"True." (Shannon Carter, "Living Insider the Bible (Belt)," *National Council of Teachers of English* 69, no. 6 [2007]: 572)

[12] The Secular Student Alliance was selected because it is "the largest atheist, humanist, and non-theist student organization in the country." According to SSA, there are a total of 304 Secular Student Alliances in the United States, 28 alliances in Texas, and 14 alliances on Texas university campuses. See The Secular Student Alliance, "Find a Chapter."

[13] Undergraduate students in Gen Z were selected for this study due to the rise of secularism among them as discussed in chap. 2.

[14] Creswell recommends that "researchers interview 5-25 individuals who have experienced the phenomenon." Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design*, 81.

Limitations of Generalization

The study sought to understand how secular students have experienced the phenomenon of Christian rhetoric and, therefore, generalization of the study's findings were limited to the ten participants but may transferable to a similar group. Although SSA is "the largest non-theist student organization" in the United States, and suggestions for best practices were made for contextualizing Christian rhetoric for secular college students within Gen Z, it is understood the data and results do not necessarily apply to all undergraduate students in Texas who were born no earlier than 1995 and who are members of an SSA.[15] Rather, data and results are applicable to the ten participants of the study.

Research Methods and Instrumentation

The study sought data in the form of experiences and perceptions and, thus, a qualitative, phenomenological methodology was appropriate. John W. Creswell writes, "a phenomenological study describes the common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon."[16] Clark Moustakas concurs with Creswell when he writes that the aim of a phenomenological methodology "is to determine what an experience means for the persons who have had the experience and are able to provide a comprehensive description of it."[17] And, because the study ultimately involved interpretation of secularists' experiences, a hermeneutic phenomenological methodology was most appropriate.[18]

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[15] The Secular Student Alliance, "Find a Chapter."

[16] Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design,* 76.

[17] Clark Moustakas, *Phenomenological Research Methods* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1994), 13.

[18] Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design,* 79-80. For further literature regarding hermeneutic phenomenology, see Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd ed., trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Mar (New York: Continuum, 2004); Linda Finlay, "Debating Phenomenological Research Methods," *Phenomenology & Practice* 3, no. 1 (2009): 6-25; Susann M.

According to Susann M. Laverty, hermeneutic phenomenology is "an interpretive process in which the researcher makes an interpretation of the meaning of the lived experience and this distinguishes it from transcendental phenomenology where one "bracket[s] out the outer world as well as individual biases."[19] In short, the researcher is the interpreter of the meaning of the lived experience and becomes one who participates in making data.[20] Hans-Georg Gadamer explains the interpretive process when he writes, "to reach an understanding . . . is not merely a matter of putting oneself forward and successfully asserting one's own point of view, but being transformed into a communion in which we do not remain what we were."[21] In summary, the interpretive process enhanced understanding secularists' experiences with Christian rhetoric and helped shape future Christian rhetorical praxis.

In this section data collection, data analysis and representation, and validity and reliability will be addressed.

Data Collection

Two types of data were sought: type 1 data consisted of audio recordings from face-to-face interviews and type 2 data consisted of any additional content the participant considered relevant to the study and wished to contribute.

Laverty, "Hermeneutic Phenomenology and Phenomenology: A Comparison of Historical and Methodological Considerations," *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 2, no. 3 (2003): 21-35.

[19] Laverty, "Hermeneutic Phenomenology and Phenomenology," 23. See also Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design,* 80; Finlay, "Debating Phenomenological Research Methods."

[19] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 371. See also Laverty, "Hermeneutic Phenomenology and Phenomenology," 25.

[20] Laverty, "Hermeneutic Phenomenology and Phenomenology," 32.

[21] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 371.

Type 1 Data: Audio recordings of interviews. Type 1 data was collected using a Zoom H1n Handy Recorder (2018 Model). Open-ended questions were asked in an effort to better understand how secular college students within Gen Z have experienced the phenomenon of Christian rhetoric. Specifically, the questions sought to determine whether the Christian's rhetoric included the elements of classical and/or Christian rhetoric as detailed in chapter 2.

The first two interview questions were broad in nature, followed by specific questions in order to understand *what* secularists experienced regarding Christian rhetoric and *how* he or she experienced it.[22] Interview questions were validated using an expert review panel and designed to answer the research question and one or more sub questions (see appendix 1).[23]

Each interview was conducted face to face at an agreed upon date, time, and location on each of the selected university campuses (student center, coffee shop, library, etc.). Interviews were expected to last between one and two hours.

Type 2 Data: Additional participant contributions. The type 2 data requested included, but was not be limited to, journal entries, poetry, music, art, blog posts, etc. Any paper copies were collected prior to the interview and electronic/digital

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[22] Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design,* 76, 79.

[23] Interview questions were formed using an expert panel, which included Alyssan Barnes, PhD, Amy Crider, EdD, and Phil Zuckerman, PhD. Barnes and Crider examined interview questions to determine that they addressed rhetorical elements. Zuckerman examined questions to determine that they were appropriately tailored to secular students. Barnes earned her PhD in Rhetoric and, at the time of this writing, taught formal rhetoric and AP English to students of Generation Z at Live Oak Classical School in Waco, TX. She is also the author of *Rhetoric Alive! Principles of Persuasion.* At the time of this writing, Crider was a Professor of English and served as a Writing Center Coordinator at Boyce College in Louisville. Her research focused on "biblically-rooted writing pedagogies and curriculum design for English composition." For a full biography, see Boyce College, "Faculty—Amy Crider," accessed February 19, 2019, http://www.boycecollege.com/academics/faculty/amy-crider/. Zuckerman is a writer, researcher, and, at the time of this writing, was a professor of sociology and secular studies at Pitzer College and an affiliated professor at Claremont Graduate University. For a full biography, see Phil Zuckerman, "Bio," Phil Zuckerman Blog, accessed February 13, 2018, https://philzuckerman.com/bio/.

copies of such data were submitted and collected via email, within two weeks of the participants' interview.

Data Analysis and Representation

According to Creswell, phenomenological data analysis and representation involves five steps: [24]

1. Develop a list of significant statements (horizonalization).
2. Group significant statements into themes (clusters of meaning).
3. Describe *what* the participants experienced (textual description).
4. Describe *how* the experience occurred (imaginative variation or structural description).
5. Write a description synthesizing textual and structural descriptions (essential, invariant structure or essence).

Since this study used a hermeneutic phenomenological methodology, one additional step was required:

6. Write an interpretive summary.[25]

A two-cycle coding process using *NVivo* coding software and participant validation were used for data analysis.[26]

Coding. Pre-coding occurred during both interviews and transcription. During interviews, a research journal was kept for memos and "codable moments," or "significant participant quotes or passages that strike."[27] During transcription, repetitive

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[24] Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design,* 82, 193-94.

[25] Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design,* 80. See also Finlay, "Debating Phenomenological Research Methods," 6-25; Laverty, "Hermeneutic Phenomenology and Phenomenology," 21-35.

[26] *NVivo* is a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) recommended by qualitative researchers. Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design*, 204; Leedy and Ormrod, *Practical Research*, 318, 339; Saldaña, *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers,* 31.

[27] Saldaña, *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers,* 20.

words, phrases, and/or significant statements were highlighted and preliminary codes created.[28]

In the first cycle of coding, In Vivo Coding[29] was used for horizonalization. Here, the participants' literal words and/or phrases were used to capture significant statements.[30] Johnny Saldaña notes that In Vivo coding is particularly helpful for deepening one's understanding of worldviews, and E. T. Stringer adds that by utilizing the participants' own words, "[Researchers] are more likely to capture the meanings inherent in people's experience," both of which are goals of a phenomenology.[31]

In the second cycle of coding, Focused Coding was used to create clusters of meaning. Focused Coding "searches for the most frequent or significant codes to develop the most salient categories," or themes.[32]

Participant validation. Following coding, an initial textual description, structural description, and essential, invariant structure were written. Each of these were emailed to the appropriate participant and the participant was given two weeks during which they may provide feedback. Feedback included, but was not limited to, additions, deletions and/or corrections and clarifications. If the participant failed to provide feedback, it was understood to be an affirmation of accuracy.

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[28] Saldaña, *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers,* 21.

[29] In Vivo Coding, a descriptive coding process should not be confused with *NVivo* coding software described previously.

[30] Saldaña, *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers,* 105.

[31] Ernest T. Stringer, *Action Research*, 4th ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2014), 329; Saldaña, *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*, 106.

[32] Saldaña, *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers,* 240.

Interpretive summary. An interpretive summary was the final step of data analysis and representation in a hermeneutic phenomenological study.[33] Frederick Wertz writes, "'interpretation' may be used, and may be called for, in order to contextually grasp parts within larger wholes, as long as it remains descriptively grounded."[34] In this study, descriptive grounding was maintained through the combination of the coding process and participant validation. Additionally, interpretive strategies such as "'top 10' list," "study's 'trinity,'" "codeweaving," and/or "touch test" were utilized.[35] The interpretive summary concluded by recommending best practices for Christian rhetoricians in their efforts to reach secular students within Gen Z with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Validity and Reliability

In an effort to maximize validity (credibility) and reliability (consistency), the following steps were taken:

1. Two pilot studies were performed to ensure that recording devices were functional, interview questions were valid, and the coding software was appropriate for the data collected.[36]

2. A research journal was kept. This journal was handwritten to distinguish it from the data.[37]

3. Throughout the study, reflexivity was practiced. I am committed to the Christian worldview as ultimate truth and actively shares this belief. Due to this, the research may be considered personally beneficial as it sought to understand and interpret secularists' perceptions of Christian rhetoric to formulate best practices for Christian rhetoricians among secular, Gen Z, college students. Moreover, I am a member of Generation Y and also have a Master of Arts in Theological Studies and currently teach elements of Christian worldview, world religions, and rhetoric

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[33] Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design,* 79-80.

[34] Frederick J. Wertz, "Phenomenological Research Methods for Counseling Psychology," *Journal of Counseling Psychology* 52, no. 5 (2005): 175.

[35] Saldaña, *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers,* 275.

[36] Leedy and Ormrod, *Practical Research*, 118, 128.

[37] Leedy and Ormrod, *Practical Research,* 278-79.

to Gen Z, high school students. The above-mentioned biases, as well as my culture, race, gender, class, and political position may have an effect on my ability to collect and interpret data."[38]

4. Two types of data were sought to be triangulated.[39] The two types of data were: audio recordings of interviews and additional participant contributions such as journal entries, poetry, music, art, and blog posts.

5. Member checking provided participants with the opportunity to approve, alter, and/or offer additional feedback on data analysis. This opportunity applied to all written results of the research: the textual description, the structural description, and the essential, invariant structure.[40]

6. Rich, thick description was used to describe the participants.[41] Details emerged from physical description, movement description, and activity description which will be recorded via memo writing.

7. A peer was identified who agreed to meet with, review research, and keep accounts of meetings."[42]

Procedures

Approval to conduct research was sought through the SBTS ethics committee using the "Risk Assessment Process for Research Involving Human Subjects." The process included the following:

1. Create a *Research Profile* by:[43]
    a. Complete the top portion of the *Approvals for Using Human Subjects in Research* form.
    b. Complete *Assessment of Risk to Human Subjects in Research* form.
    c. Include Title Page for the study.
    d. Include a copy of Research Purpose, Research Questions, Design Overview, Population, Sample, Delimitations, Limitations of Generalization, Instrumentation, and Vitae.

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[38] Leedy and Ormrod, *Practical Research*, 278. See also Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design*, 215-16.

[39] Leedy and Ormrod, *Practical Research,* 278. See also Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design,* 251.

[40] Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design,* 252.

[41] Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design,* 252.

[42] Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design,* 251.

[43] The Agreement to Participate Form is included in appendix 2.

2. Submit the *Research Profile* for approval to conduct research by the research supervisor.[44]

3. Await approval notification.

4. Use the informed consent and agreement to participate based on the level of risk determined by the ethics committee.

Once approval was granted by the SBTS ethics committee, the following steps were taken in preparation for collection and analysis of data:

5. All SSA's that met the criterion were contacted using information provided on the national SSA website.[45] Once the initial contact was attempted, the SSA had seven days in which to respond. If no response was received within seven days, a second contact attempt was made. There was a one-week deadline for response following the second attempt. Finally, if the SSA did not respond within one week of the second contact attempt, a third attempt with another one-week window for response was made.

   The first five SSA's to commit to the study were selected.

6. Once an SSA had expressed a willingness to participate in the study, the SSA president was contacted via phone call, FaceTime, or email which served an introduction, provided details of the proposed study, and detailed the incentive for participation in the proposed study ($50 Amazon Gift Card).

7. The SSA was asked to provide a list of willing participants, who met all listed criterion, along with their contact information (telephone number and/or email).

8. Individuals selected for participation were contacted using information supplied by the university SSA. If no response was received within seven days, a second contact attempt was made. There was a one-week deadline for response following the second attempt. Finally, if the individual did not respond within one week of the second contact attempt, a third attempt with another one-week window for response was used.

   If a selected individual did not respond to the three contact attempts, another individual was selected.

9. A date, time, and location were determined for the interview.

10. Prior to the interview, participants were given a description of the research and an informed consent form. The informed consent form was completed for the individual to participate in the study.

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[44] Following approval by the research supervisor, the profile was sent to the SBTS Research Ethics Committee. Upon approval by the Research Ethics committee to conduct research, the profile was sent to the Senior Vice President for Academic Administration. Upon Senior Vice President approval to conduct research, the profile was sent back to the SBTS Research Ethics Committee for processing.

[45] The Secular Student Alliance, "Find a Chapter."

11. Interviews were conducted, and additional participant contributions were collected.

12. Data was transcribed and coded using *NVivo* coding software.

13. Once the interview was transcribed, each participant received an email which contained an expression of gratitude for their participation in the study along with a digital copy of the transcript. Each participant was given two weeks to approve, alter, clarify, and/or offer additional feedback regarding his or her transcript. If, after two weeks, the participant did not provide feedback, his or her transcript was considered approved.

14. An initial textual description, structural description, and essential, invariant structure were written for each participant's data and each participant was provided with a digital copy of each. Participants were given two weeks to provide feedback on each of these.

15. A data-driven interpretive summary was written.

Conclusion

Chapter 3 details the methodology and instrumentations used for interpreting secular students' perceptions of the phenomenon of Christian rhetoric. The remaining two chapters will provide an analysis of findings and their results. In particular, chapter 4 will detail significant statements, clusters of meaning, and thick descriptions emerging from data. Chapter 5 will include implications of the study's results and recommendations for praxis grounded in research findings.

CHAPTER 4

ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS

In a column for *Christianity Today*, Rosaria Champagne Butterfield writes of her pre-conversion, "As a university professor, I tired of students who seemed to believe that 'knowing Jesus' meant knowing little else. Christians in particular were bad readers, always seizing opportunities to insert a Bible verse into a conversation with the same point as a punctuation mark: to end it rather than deepen it."[1] Undoubtedly, there are those who would disagree with Butterfield, but secular college students within Gen Z generally agree with her assessment. According to one participant, "I was in the world of mindless Christianity." Another said, "A lot of the times . . . they've memorized this little paragraph of apologetic that they're supposed to give. But if you respond to it their brain short-circuits and then they don't have a reaction to that." And when asked whether Christians asked thought-provoking questions, one responded, "No, no. Most of the time it's—I get interrogated about my beliefs. Then I share my beliefs and then they say, 'God is love.' And then they offer to pray for me, and then they leave."

The aim of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to understand secular college students' perceptions of Christian rhetoric and interpret data to shape Christian rhetorical praxis. This chapter details the (1) compilation of protocol, (2) participation data, (3) summary of findings, and (4) evaluation of research design.

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[1] Rosaria Champagne Butterfield, "My Train Wreck Conversion," *Christianity Today*, February 7, 2013, https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2013/january-february/my-train-wreck-conversion.html.

Compilation of Protocol

Data was collected through in-person interviews of the population sample. Fourteen Secular Student Alliances (SSA's) in Texas were contacted by email and/or Facebook using SSA's national public contact webpage (see appendix 2).[2] Communicating through Facebook, email, phone, and/or text, nine SSA's responded and expressed interest in participating in the study. In response, an email detailing participation criterion, incentive for participation, and assurance of participant anonymity was sent to each of the nine SSA's (see appendix 3). The email also included a request for names and contact information for willing participants. After additional communication using the aforementioned channels, five SSA's replied with a list of willing participants.

Two participants were randomly selected from each of the five universities and, subsequently, contacted via email to schedule the date, time, and location for the interview (see appendix 4). The ten interviews were conducted in person; seven interviews were conducted on the participants' campus and the remaining three were conducted at off-campus sites (see figure 2).[3] Prior to the interview, each participant received An Agreement to Participate Form and a $50.00 Amazon Gift Card for their participation (see appendix 5). Interviews were recorded using a Zoom H1n Handy Recorder (2018 Model).

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[2] The Secular Student Alliance, "Find a Chapter," accessed February 18, 2019, https://secularstudents.org/find-a-chapter/.

[3] For interviews, estimated travel time and distance were 23 hours and 20 minutes and 1,365 miles, respectively.

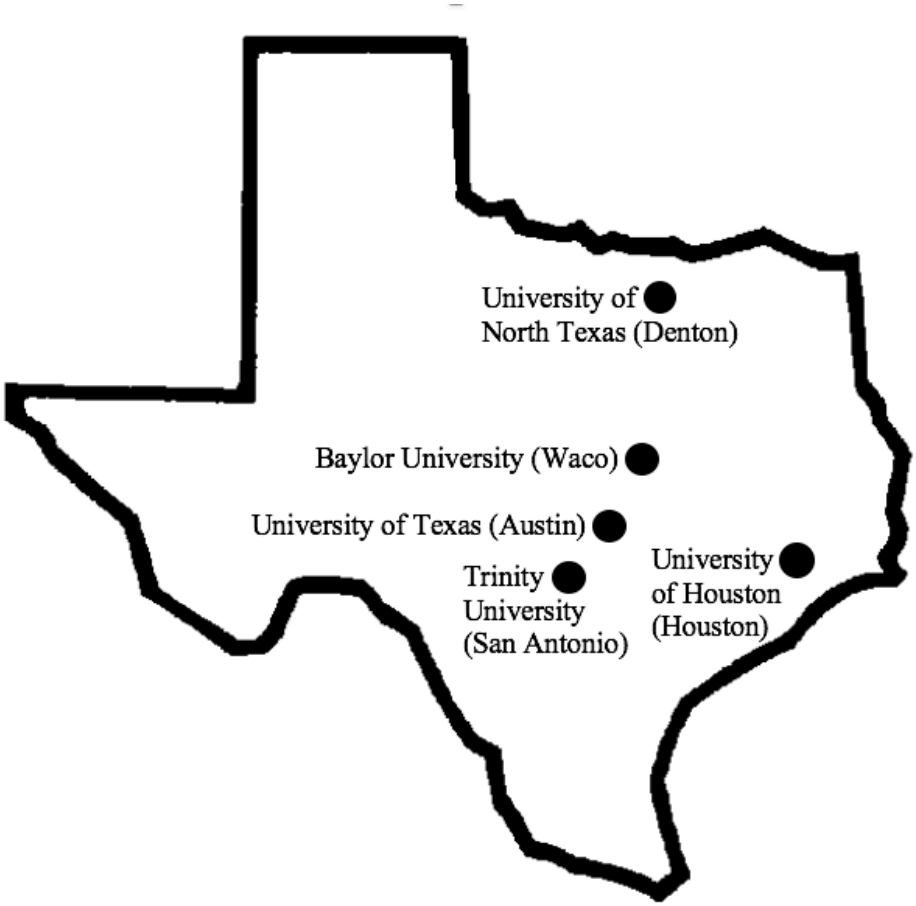

Figure 2. Map of interview locations

The time of interviews ranged from thirty-seven minutes to one hour and fifty-six minutes with an average length of one hour and fifteen minutes. Notes were taken during each interview using a self-created analytic form (see appendix 6).

Once all interviews were completed, they were downloaded and transcribed using NVIVO's transcription services. Interviews were digitally transcribed and then manually reviewed and edited. Transcriptions were then sent to participants for member verification (see appendix 7). Next, data was manually coded and organized using NVIVO software. Lastly, a summary of data analysis was sent to each participant.

Participation Data

Demographic data was collected at the beginning of each interview to confirm the participant met the selection criterion described in chapter 3.[4]

Academic Classification and Gender

Criterion for the study mandated that participants not be born prior to 1995. However, in order to maintain anonymity, exact ages and majors of participants will not be detailed. At the time interviews were conducted, the academic classification of the participants was as follows: 4 freshmen, 3 sophomores, 1 junior, and 2 seniors. There were 7 male participants and 3 female participants (see table 1).

Table 1. Grade level and gender of participants

Grade Level	Male	Female
Freshman	2	2
Sophomore	3	
Junior	1	
Senior	1	1

Racial Diversity

Racially, participants identified as follows: 1 African American, 1 Asian American, 3 Hispanic Americans and 5 White Americans. Several commented about their race during their interview. For example, when one participant was asked if he/she wanted to add anything regarding his/her experience, he/she responded, "To be honest, being atheist in the African-American community especially is just very—it's just very distinct, because African-Americans just have a history of being very Christian based . . . it kind of makes you—it kind of makes other people see you as less black."[5] Two other participants referenced their family's use of religious phrases in Spanish during their childhood. One of them said, "My grandmother would tell me in Spanish, whenever we

[4] See chap. 3, pp. 45-46. For characteristics of Gen Z, see chap. 2, pp. 34-40.

[5] To maintain anonymity, "he/she" and similar diction will be used for every participant.

would go for a drive anywhere, before she'd start the car, she'd turn to us, she'd cross over us and then say, 'May God protect you,'" while another participant heard the phrase, "Dios te vandiga" (God bless you) while growing up.

Sexual Fluidity

In a 2018 study regarding Gen Z, Barna reported that approximately one-eighth of thirteen to eighteen-year-olds identified as something other than heterosexual.[6] In this study, four of the ten participants identified as gay or lesbian and one stated they had previously identified as pansexual. Participants who identified as gay or lesbian and who also stated they were raised in Christian homes, described life at home as "a very dark time," characterized by "mental health issues," and "marginalization."

Christian Upbringing

According to a 2013 study by *American Religious Identification Survey at Trinity College*, 37 percent of millennial college students who attended church regularly in their upbringing identified as "secular" in college.[7] Of the ten participants in the study, five now identifying as agnostic, atheist, or agnostic-atheist stated they had once identified with a particular church or denomination: Catholic (1), Southern Baptist (2), unspecified Baptist (1) and unspecified denomination (1). Phrases like, "I used to be a Christian," "fervently believed everything," and "I believed these things" were frequently used by participants. In other words, participants did not merely attend church, they stated they both identified with and *believed* in Christianity.

All participants either spent all or the majority of their formative years in Texas and shared this was a factor in how they perceived Christians and their message.

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[6] Barna Group, *Gen Z: The Culture, Beliefs, and Motivations Shaping the Next Generation* (Ventura, CA: Barna Group and Impact 360 Institute, 2018), 40.

[7] Barry A. Kosmin and Ariela Keysar, "Religious, Spiritual and Secular: The Emergence of Three Distinct Worldviews among American College Students," *American Religious Identification Survey at Trinity College*, September 2013, https://www.trincoll.edu/Academics/centers/isssc/Documents/ARIS_2013_College%20Students_Sept_25_final_draft.pdf, 11.

Summary of Findings

As analytic memos were reviewed, and audio interviews transcribed, read, and coded, a number of prominent themes emerged from the data. Themes were identified using a two-cycle coding process: first cycle coding made use of In Vivo Coding while second cycle coding utilized Focused Coding. Once In Vivo Coding was completed, Focused Coding was used to search "for the most frequent or significant codes to develop the most salient categories," or themes.[8] The top 10 Focused Codes (themes) were selected and used to identify three meta-themes which represent the "study's 'trinity.'"[9]

Top 10 Focused Codes

This section will consider the study's top 10 Focused Codes (themes) derived from In Vivo Coding. Each Focused Code below is grouped based on its contribution to one of three meta-themes (as seen in figure 3), which will be identified and detailed in a subsequent section, "Meta-themes: The study's trinity."

Focused Codes
Focused Code 1: Christianity is illogical
Focused Code 2: Do not question, be certain
Focused Code 3: Bible and Christians' use of it is unreliable
Focused Code 4: Barriers to belief
Focused Code 5: Uneasy feeling and emotions
Focused Code 6: Recommendations
Focused Code 7: Assumptions
Focused Code 8: Christian communication
Focused Code 9: Desire for genuine discourse
Focused Code 10: Isolated upbringing

Figure 3. Summary of grouped focused codes

[8] Johnny Saldaña, *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*, 3rd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2016), 240.

[9] Saldaña, *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers,* 275.

Focused Codes 1, 2, 3, and 4:
Meta-Theme 1

A summary of In Vivo and Focused Codes 1, 2, 3, and 4 can be viewed on page 66, figure 4.

Focused Code 1: Christianity is illogical. When participants were asked if Christianity made sense, participants were unanimous in their response; Christian apologetics and/or Christian doctrine are illogical. Fifty percent of participants mentioned one or several "unhelpful" apologetics, including Kalam's Cosmological Argument, Pascal's Wager, Aquinas's Teleological Argument, and Anselm's Ontological Argument.[10]

Participants considered the doctrine of Christ's substitutionary death and the existence of hell most illogical. In addition, one participant suggested Christianity was emotionally logical, but intellectually illogical. Another participant had this to say about Christ's substitutionary death:

> A God who sacrificed himself to himself to account for rules that he made and things like that. That doesn't make sense to me. If God is setting that the wages of sin is death and he is—either he is omnipotent, and he can change those wages to ensure that more people can get into heaven. Or, he can't, in which case he's not omnipotent. Or, if he is omniscient then he would have been able to think of a better way that doesn't require the eternal suffering of billions of people in and throughout history. And if he's omni-benevolent, he would have done that thing.

While many participants admitted they could not logically reconcile a benevolent God with the existence of hell, one participant pointedly stated he/she could not logically reconcile the God of the Bible, the creator of that hell, with a loving God.

> That doesn't make sense to me how you can read that story of God punishing someone who was pious and prosperous and believed in him and did all of this stuff for him. And was testing his faith by taking away everything in his life. Everything good. That's not something a loving being would do. . . . The idea of "God created us to be the way that we are." God created me to be gay, if God created me. . . . And if God created me that way and then punishes me for being that way. That's a pretty

[10] For further reading on Kalam's Cosmological Argument, Pascal's Wager, Aquinas's Teleological Argument, and Anselm's Ontological Argument, see Norman L. Geisler, *The Big Book of Christian Apologetics: An A to Z Guide* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2012).

> s****y God. . . . The image of God that has been painted for me, both by the Bible and by Christians and by common understanding of God, is of a pretty heinous being, of someone who does some pretty terrible things that you can come up with justifications for, maybe. But my response is still going to be I am not interested in worshipping a being like that. I'm interested in asking that being what the h**l it thinks it's doing.[11]

The participant who deemed Christianity emotionally logical, but intellectually illogical stated:

> It makes sense, I guess, from an emotional standpoint, not from any logical standpoint. Because it's like, we all want someone to talk to . . . we all want someone to rely on. We all want someone to just take care of us. We all want to, like, end up in—in the end . . . like, we all want the happy ending. That's why there's always happy endings in movies, TV shows, games, everything. The happy ending is the end goal. And if you believe that there's no happy ending, that's scary. That's intimidating. That scares the life out of people.

Additionally, participants felt that Christian language was contradictory. For example,

> "Oh it was in God's plan." And I'm like, "Then what's the point of praying if his plan was already going to go to his plan?" Like, if you pray and your prayer doesn't come true, "Oh that was just, God just decided," you know? If you pray and it does come true, "All hail glory God. He's so merciful." And it's just like, it was going to happen. The outcome was already going to happen whether or not you prayed.

Another participant mentioned something similar and then commented, "It feels a little like a catch 22."

Focused Code 2: Do not question, be certain. The majority of participants who grew up in church were told not to question or doubt their faith, and some felt afraid to do so. One noted, "I started doubting when—I guess when like those core questions in my mind came up, you know, like evil . . . I was kind of afraid to dig into those questions." Participants perceived their questions were "frowned upon"; statements like, "You're just supposed to believe" and "you're not supposed to question it" were frequently mentioned during interviews. Because they believed their questions unwelcome, participants described Christian communities as committed to "group think,"

[11] Participant responses are verbatim with the exception of possible offensive words, which have been altered to be less offensive.

functioning as "echo chamber[s]," and advocating "mindless Christianity." One participant stated, "It would just make it easier for me to just, like, follow along with what other people are doing." When participants' questions persisted and only "vague explanations" provided, doubts only grew stronger.

Focus Code 3: The Bible and Christians' use of it is unreliable. The Bible was referenced approximately 158 times during the ten interviews and individual interviews ranged from 9 references to 30 references. While participants' thoughts about the Bible varied, their overwhelming contention was the Bible is unreliable and weak evidence for Christianity. Participant descriptions included "inconsistent," "contradictory," not "historical," "mythology," fairytale," and "piece of literature." One participant described his/her perception of the Bible as follows:

> I don't think that it is God breathed. I don't think it's the word of God, because I don't believe that there was a God to breathe it. I think it was written by men who were trying to figure things out as best they could with their own cultural and historical biases. I think that there are pieces in it that have good messages, but I think that there are messages that can be spread just as well without the religiosity. We have fairytales that convey morals without you needing to believe that a big bad wolf will actually eat girls in red hoods.

Participants not only questioned the reliability of the Bible, they also distrusted how Christians used it, stating that Christians jettison portions and justify atrocities:

> That's a big problem when it comes to the Bible it's like it's really-really, easy to read the parts you want to read. And it's really-really easy to, I don't want to say cherry pick, because I know that people get touchy about that term, but that's kind of what it is to a certain extent is like, you find the parts that you like and you find the parts that speak to you and you ignore all the rest or you find a justification to ignore all the rest. . . . It's been a book that's been used to justify so many atrocities and I feel kind of like I'm being rude to bring that up necessarily, but you know when it comes to the Bible like that has been used to justify so many terrible things. Like in—now maybe this is too extreme of an example but during slavery in the American south.

Participants' regard for the Bible is best summarized by the following exchange from one interview:

Interviewer: Give me an example where you'd walk away and go, "That was just not effective at all" or an example where you've felt (before interviewer could finish)

Interviewee: Well, handing me the Bible.

In short, because participants deem the Bible unreliable, the Bible contributes little, if any, to a positive perception of Christians and their message.

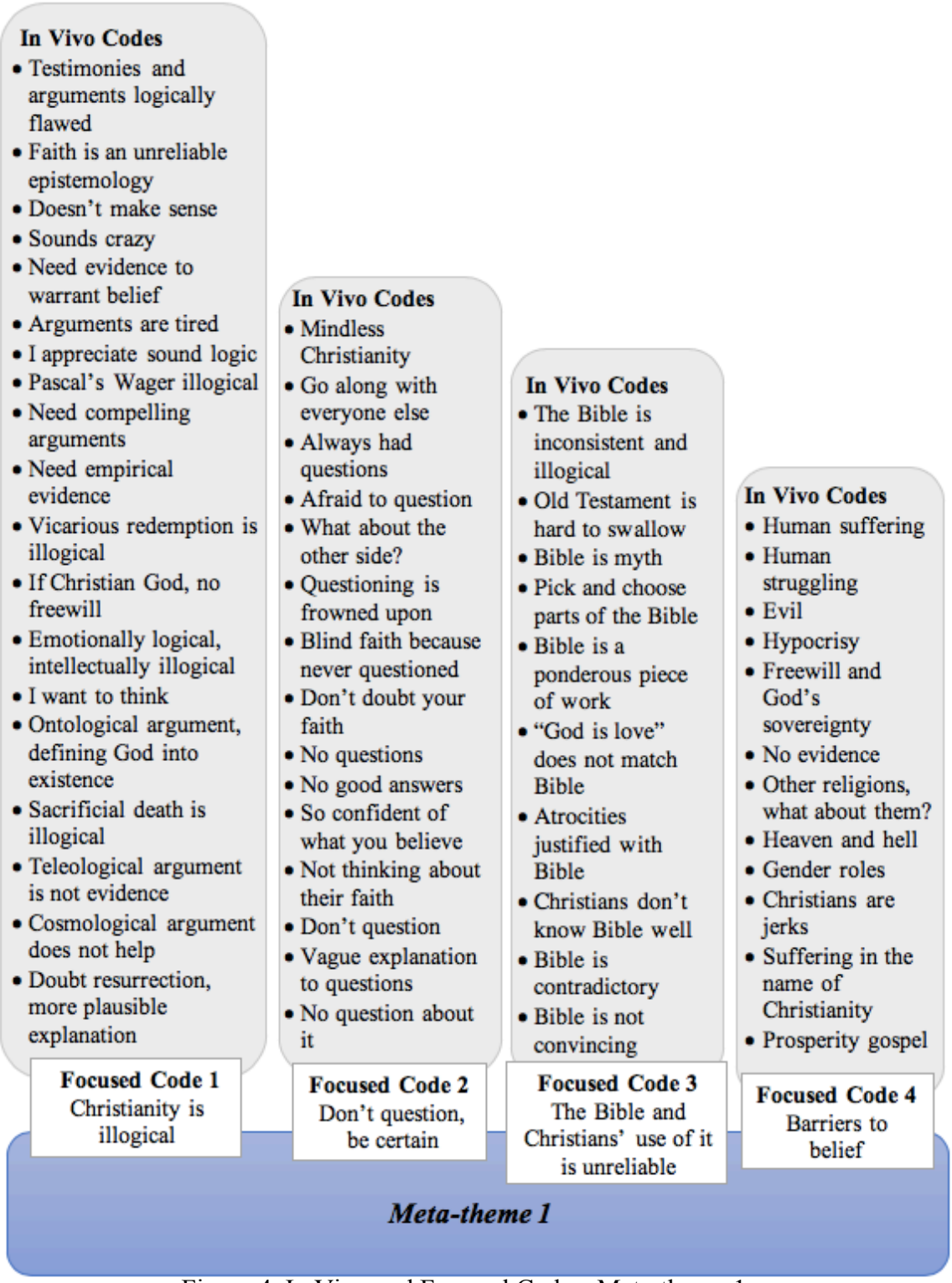

Figure 4. In Vivo and Focused Codes: Meta-theme 1

Focused Code 4: Barriers to belief. In addition to the Bible, participants identified a number of barriers to belief in the Christian faith. These included atrocities committed in the name of Christianity, human suffering, the problem of evil, gender roles, Christian hypocrisy, and lack of evidence. Statements like, "[There are] crises all over the world, and I just don't believe there's any beyond-earthly-power that would allow that to happen to so many people" and "I don't believe that a loving God would send billions of people to hell all because you don't identify as Christian," were common.

Not all barriers to belief were doctrinal, however. One student bluntly stated, "If you want me to believe your thing, maybe don't be an a*****e to me . . . It is a barrier. I would listen to more of these arguments if they weren't told to me as though I was an idiot."

Focused Codes 5, 6, and 7: Meta-Theme 2

A summary of In Vivo and Focused Codes 5, 6, and 7 can be viewed on page 70, figure 5.

Focused Code 5: Uneasy feelings and emotions. Although many participants stated they felt cared for and comfortable in some interactions with Christians, all provided at least one instance involving family, friends, and/or strangers where they felt uncomfortable, afraid, anxious, and/or believed the Christian(s) disingenuous.

Speaking about Christianity, one participant shared the following: "Religion for me and my life has been fear and confusion and anxiety." The following exchange took place during this same participant's interview:

Interviewee: Wow it's just all coming out. It's weird. Oh my goodness. This is weird. Let's see (long pause).

Interviewer: Take your time. Is your mind pulling up memories?

Interviewee: Yeah.

Interviewer: If you want to share any of those (long pause). It's a lot to take in.

After a moment and several deep breaths, the interviewee gathered his thoughts,

> It's a lot to take in, but it's a good thing. It really gets me thinking. . . . Like, I have had to foundationally change my life and my ideas separate from the people who raised me and to do it like all well as early on as I have is stressful and confusing because part of this is again, I've told you, my descent or my journey so far into secularism has kind of been like, I don't want to feel that pain.

At one point in this interview, the participant brought his/her hands to his/her chest as if guarding himself/herself and stated, "Not that I don't want to have a civil conversation with you. But I need to protect myself." Although he/she said he/she felt comfortable during the interview, remembering and examining his/her past made the participant visibly uneasy.

Additionally, eight of ten participants expressed fear or discomfort in "coming out" as secular. Several participants stated they had revealed their secularism to only one or two family members while others said they hadn't revealed it to anyone. They shared statements like, "I never felt comfortable straight out coming and saying, 'I'm secular,'" "So far, my mom and my brother are the only ones who know that I don't believe," and "I feel like they would have looked at me differently [if they knew]." The following exchange took place during one interview when the participant was asked for the reason for their reluctance to reveal their secularism:

Interviewee: I would say fear, yes. Like if I didn't have any fear then I definitely would tell them but I do have fear coming out to them.

Interviewer: Yeah. What do you think is, like, the underlying fear?

Interviewee: Um, I guess them not looking at me anymore in the same way anymore, you know? Like, "Oh, did we do something wrong?" Like, I don't want them to feel guilty like . . . like they failed at being good Christian parents. You know what I mean? I don't want them to feel that at all. You know?

Participants who grew up in church also expressed that fear, rather than genuine belief, motivated their former belief. One noted, "I can't remember where I heard

it, but I just heard the sentence, 'If you're believing this out of fear then you're not really believing it. You're just afraid.' And then when I heard that, I was like, 'Wow, that described me perfectly. I literally only did this because of fear.'"

Focused Code 6: Recommendations. Jokingly, one participant stated, "I feel like there's a list of ten things Christians shouldn't do." A partial list of the *don'ts* shared by participants included "don't immediately assume" and "don't come at me like you're going to fight me." However, participants also provided Christians with *do's* like "talk to me," "admit mistakes," and "ask more interesting questions, of course. Be open and have something interesting to say or play with."

A number of participants urged Christians to just "think."

> Be able to express your beliefs and why. Don't just spit out whatever your pastor tells you or like—think for yourself and figure out why you believe, is the big thing. Because personally, my mother doesn't like to talk about this kind of thing, right? So I don't know why she's so dogmatic in her faith. And . . . when I ask her, "Why do you believe this?" She's not about to answer.

In general, participants routinely expressed a desire for Christians to think "with" them rather than "against" them and this desire was best expressed by one participant who said, "Just talk to me like, you know, the basic courtesy that you give the person that hands you your Starbucks. You know, just that level of human decency."

Focused Code 7: Assumptions. As the old adage goes, "You know what they say about assuming," and according to participants, Christians' assumptions are titanic. First, participants believe Christians make assumptions about their religious backgrounds. As one shared, "Predominantly, a lot of people that I encounter assume that I grew up non-religious or assumed that if I grew up—that if I have heard about Christianity growing up that it was this quote unquote 'incorrect version.'" Next, participants believed Christians assume atheists hate God. Christians were noted for saying, "'Oh, you're atheist, therefore you hate God.'" Additionally, they believe Christians assume they have no morals and were recognized for asking atheists, "'Where are your morals?'"

And finally, participants also believe Christians assume they will be unfriendly. One said Christians seemed surprised by "the fact that I am friendly to them, that I will smile at them, and that I know they're Christian and I'm not telling them how stupid they are and that, like, why don't you believe in science or whatever."

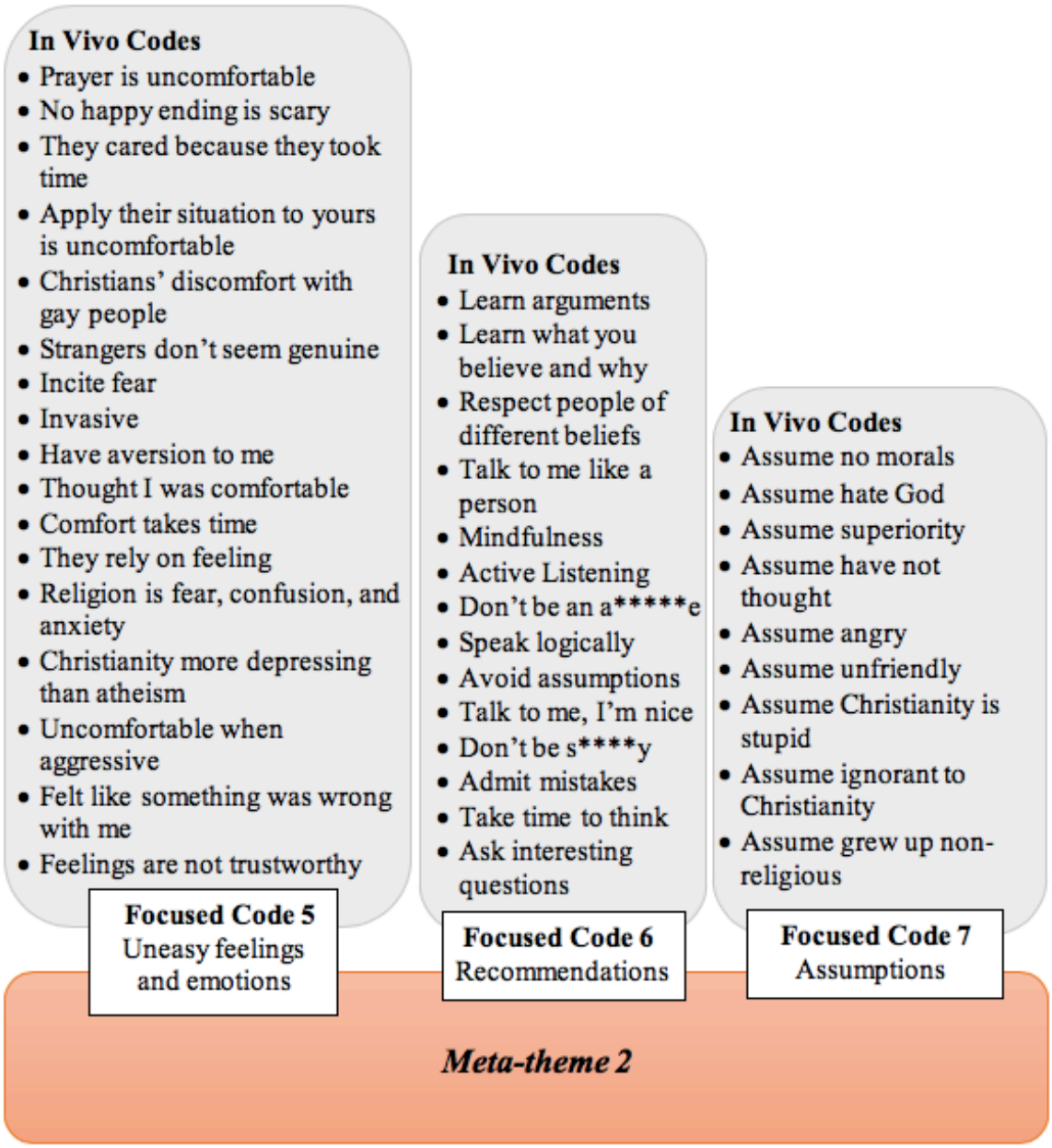

Figure 5. In Vivo and Focused Codes: Meta-theme 2

Focused Codes 8, 9, and 10: Meta-theme 3

A summary of In Vivo and Focused Codes 8, 9, and 10 can be viewed on page 74, figure 6.

Focused Code 8: Christian communication. While laughing, one participant described a Christian they had encountered thusly: "You don't know how to talk not Christian." The most frequent statements participants remembered hearing were, "God is love," "Jesus loves you," and "Jesus changed me." These statements were rarely supported with stories, metaphors, or illustrations.

Furthermore, participants perceived Christians had memorized a *script to tell them* and were not interested in having a *conversation with them*. For instance, "The [Christian] script gets broken, because they think they know what I'm about to say. Because they're told, you know, 'You say this and then the atheist will respond with this and you respond with this.' And I think that the script gets broken because I don't respond the way they expect me to, because not all atheists are the same." Similarly, one participant stated, "I kind of wanted it to end, because I knew it wasn't going to get anywhere. Like, I knew they were just going to tell me 'Jesus loves you' and this and that. I don't want to, because I didn't want to waste their time either." Although participants mentioned that Christians shared personal stories/testimonies, participants felt that such personal stories were not convincing evidence and one described it as "trying to apply their situation onto you."

Finally, several participants referred to the tone of Christian communication. "It's not the fact that they're Christians that bothers me. It's this specific way that they talk to me." When this same participant was asked to provide a descriptive title for one of his/her experiences with a Christian, he/she offered "Condescending and Christ." Another participant shared a similar thought:

> It's usually, "No mine's just right. Yours is wrong," and it's just like, even though they never particularly say that, it's just, it's kind of implied, and that bugs me, because it's like you're no smarter or no more right than any of them to be honest because in the end, the only people that know are the people, you know, that died. And last time I checked we're all on the same level of existence right now.

Focused Code 9: Desire for genuine discourse. Participants routinely expressed a desire for conversation with Christians; one remarked, "I don't want an echo chamber. I'm not interested in having a roomful of people all talking about how stupid God is. And having a religious person there is generally a pretty good damper on that kind of talk. But also, it's interesting because they do bring a new perspective to things."

A second participant offered the following during their interview: "I enjoy going to [names theological club] because their whole thing is having discussion and presenting their ideas. . . . Being someone who doesn't believe in a God, I do enjoy talking to people who do about their beliefs." Meanwhile, a third participant stated, "I don't really get these talks with other like—talks with Christians super often as much. So, it was honestly a refreshing, good experience. While I consider myself, like, decently versed in the arguments, it's nice to kind of test them out I would say—actually talking to someone." And, finally, a fourth participant quite pensively stated he/she enjoyed talking with Christians because their "perspective is important. Hearing a different one is a part of forming your own."

While participants expressed a desire for conversations with Christians, they also expressed dissatisfaction with the types of conversations they had previously experienced with Christians. The following are the words of one participant, but they convey thoughts shared by a number of participants:

> Five-minute conversations don't really do very much . . . it's in depth conversations where I can get to the root of what you believe, and you can get to the root of what I believe and why. That's where I get those thought-provoking questions—where I can have a sincere conversation with someone and genuinely talk to them and go, "I understand this is what you believe, but how did you get there from this thing?" Those questions. Or like, "Well then because you did this thing, how do you feel about this because of that" and things like that. That's where there's more thought-provoking questions come into play—you're not going to get that from a bus ride conversation or something. So, it's—yeah—there definitely have been thought-provoking questions, they have been effective in that manner of making me examine my beliefs more closely when they're an in-depth conversation because like I said when it's that tired rhetoric that I've heard a hundred times, I don't even have to really think about that response. I'm not examining anything within myself. I'm just going through the motions of, "Well, they say this. You respond to this. You say this. They respond this" and stuff like that. And that's just not interesting to me.

This same participant also shared their excitement about a Christian group he/she attended as a secularist.

> I was regularly going to this Methodist group that meets on [names street] because they had really good groups that were actually interested in genuine discussion because that's what I wanted. I didn't want to just go there to be preached at. So, it was like they have a group called "Who created God?" which is a sort of a philosophical view of why, they're a Christian group of course, they believe that God exists. But they're a small group of just philosophically speaking, is there good reason to believe that any God exists? And then we'll worry about the theology to figure out which one, which God it is. So that was really interesting because it helped me examine my beliefs closer. It helped me express—this is why I don't find that argument convincing. . . . And so that was really cool and just helped me engage with them.

Two additional participants stated they attended—and enjoyed—Christian organizations that provided opportunities for metaphysical discourse for all groups of people. However, the majority of participants did not mention having something like this available to them.

Focused Code 10: Isolated upbringing. When participants discussed either their journey to or current involvement with secularism, they expressed feelings of isolation in one of two ways. First, those who grew up in a Christian environment felt as though they had journeyed to secularism alone. Second, those who did not have a Christian upbringing considered themselves the lone voice in a sea of Christianity. One participant said his/her peers would joke with him/her and say, "Shun the non-believer." Another stated, "Before high school started, anytime I told someone I wasn't Christian they always freaked out or they looked at me different or some people would tell me that I'm going to hell." In addition, participants used words and phrases like "outcast," "loner," "weirdo," "minority perspective," "voice against the crowd," and "lone wolf" to describe themselves. One student spoke frankly, "When you go your whole life being the odd one out all the time it really-really isolates you. And it wasn't the fact that I didn't believe in God that was making me feel s****y, it was the fact that I was surrounded by a bunch of people who did believe in God and who thought I was a bad person because I didn't."

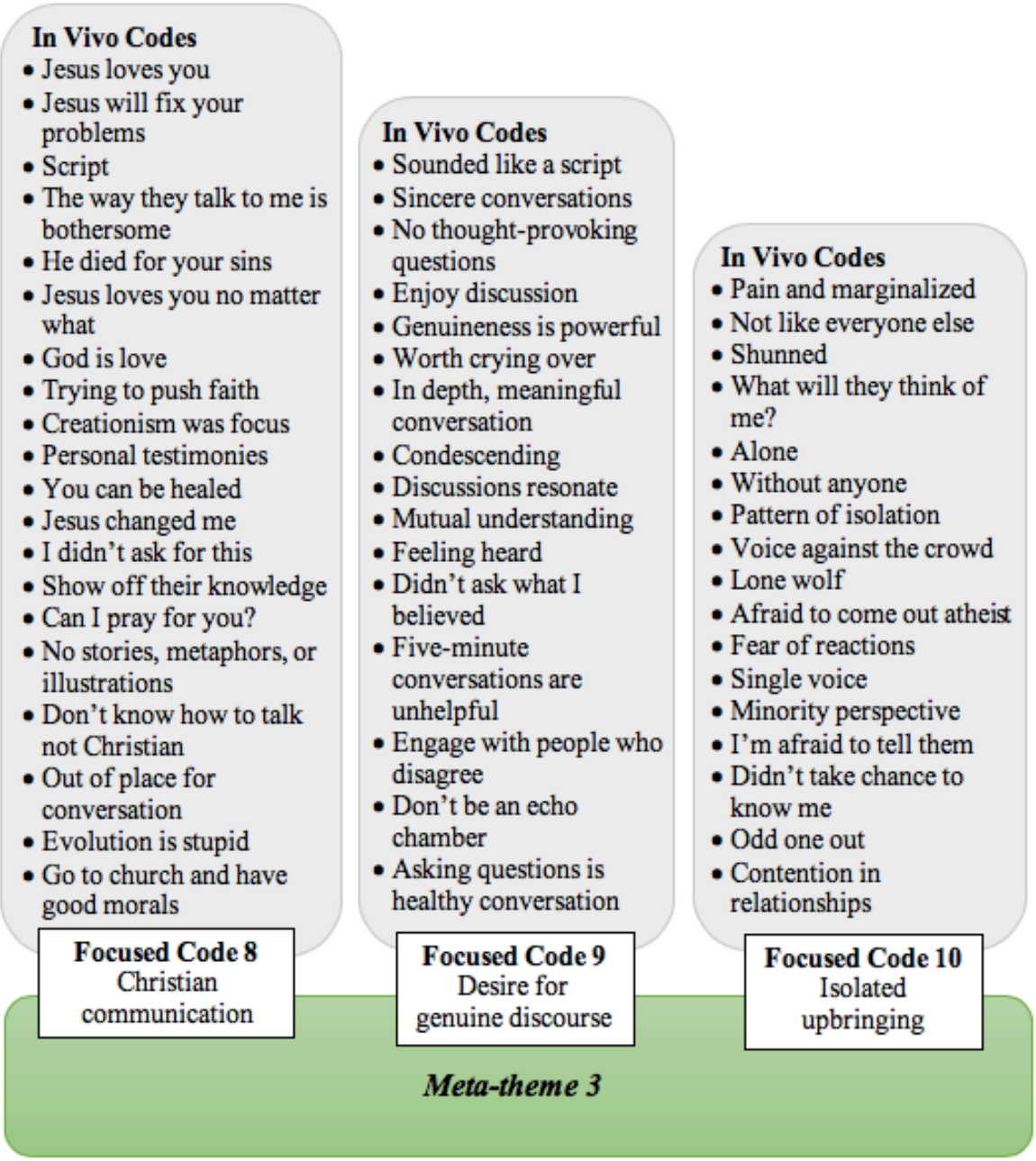

Figure 6. In Vivo and Focused Codes: Meta-theme 3

Meta-Themes: The Study's Trinity

Participants' perceptions of Christian rhetoric culminate in three meta-themes: (1) intellectual vulnerability, (2) empathetic imagination, and (3) steeped embodied discourse (see figure 7). Each meta-theme overlaps and complements the others to form

the study's trinity, and, therefore, meta-themes should not be considered in isolation. This section will describe each meta-theme derived from the data.

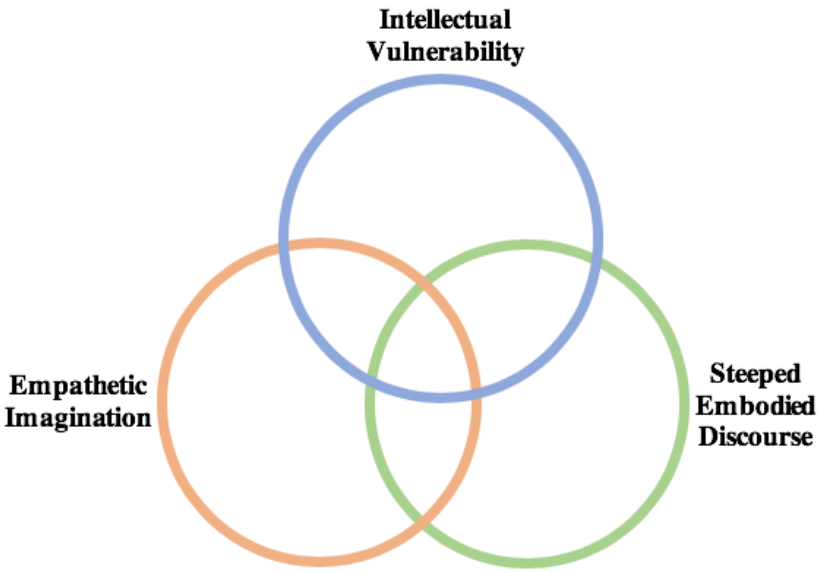

Figure 7. The study's trinity

Intellectual vulnerability. In an interview with *Forbes*, sociologist and writer Brené Brown remarks, "Vulnerability is basically uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure. . . . I wasn't taught how to deal with uncertainty or how to manage emotional risk. I spent a lot of years trying to outrun or outsmart vulnerability by making things certain and definite, black and white, good and bad."[12] Later Brown notes, "Most of us don't trust perfect and that's a good instinct."[13] Additionally, the Oxford English Dictionary defines vulnerability as, "Open to attack or injury of a non-physical nature . . . offering an opening to the attacks of raillery, criticism, calumny, etc."[14] Thus, to be

[12] Dan Schawbel, "Brené Brown: How Vulnerability Makes Our Lives Better," *Forbes*, April 21, 2013, https://www.forbes.com/sites/danschawbel/2013/04/21/brene-brown-how-vulnerability-can-make-our-lives-better/#562b857e36c7.

[13] Schawbel, "Brené Brown."

[14] *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "vulnerability."

intellectually vulnerable is to risk intellectual exposure and authentically admit, *I don't have all the answers because my knowledge is incomplete. And, because my knowledge is incomplete, I will constantly be asking questions and seeking answers. I will acknowledge the fallacies of my arguments and, most importantly, I will not surrender to my instinctive desire for certainty.* And, according to participants in this study, Christians sorely need intellectual vulnerability. When Christians demonstrated a lack of intellectual vulnerability, barriers to winsome discussion were erected. Dogmatic certainty led the listener to believe questions are unwelcome and, with no opportunity for dialogue, the listener became anxious and felt cornered. One participant described his experience with a Christian as follows: "It's usually, 'No mine's just right. Yours is wrong.'" Another participant shared,

> I was too scared to mention that I was questioning that seriously about my faith, because by that point, I was terrified to say anything. It is like, "I know my faith is dying" and I don't know, that terrified me. And I was scared to tell anyone that that was happening. And so, it was something that I went through largely alone as my world fell down around me.

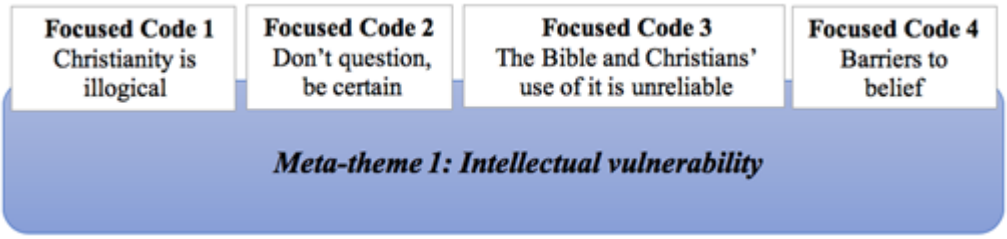

Figure 8. Meta-theme 1: Intellectual vulnerability

According to the study's data, lack of intellectual vulnerability manifested itself in one of two ways. In some instances, the Christian attempted to hide his or her lack of knowledge. For example, one participant stated, "I think there's some aspect of certain Christians who know that they don't know the Bible that well, and they don't want to talk about it because that will show a gap in their knowledge of the thing they're trying to convince you of. And that's not a good look." In other instances, the Christian

attempted to flaunt his or her knowledge. One participant described such an experience thusly:

> [They] were looking for an excuse to share their deep knowledge of whatever apologetic they have. . . . It's very much like they want to like, "Gotch-ya! I've got all of this in-depth knowledge about this thing and I'm going to get you because you don't know it" . . . it's about them because they want to have that, you know, show off their knowledge and show off like how much they know.

Multiple participants also spoke at length about Christians use of common apologetics and their inadequacies.

> I've heard a lot of the arguments. Obviously, I can't claim to have heard all of them but you know Aquinas and the teleological argument . . . there's a lot of them out there, and I've heard a lot of them. And I've yet to find any of them particularly convincing because there's always some kind of special pleading or this assumption you have to make.

Another participant said this about their experience: "He also went into Kalam's cosmological argument and it was a bit frustrating hearing him getting up there, talking like these were legitimate arguments [for the existence of God]." While participants indicated apologetics like Kalam's Cosmological Argument, Aquinas's Teleological Argument, and Anselm's Ontological Argument have a place in discourse, they find them inadequate for *proving* the existence of God.[15] Not only did the participants characterize apologetics as ineffective, they believe that Christians deliver them in a rote manner; "You say this and then the atheist will respond with this and you respond with this." In other words, participants believe Christians have embraced a formulaic mindset that says a certain amount of the right apologetic, delivered in the right order with the right rationale will provide absolute proof for God's existence. It is here, however, that intellectual vulnerability acknowledges that, although support can be made for the existence of God through an apologetic, it is not a neo-scholastic formula or providing verifiable evidence for the actuality of a God.

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[15] For further reading on Kalam's Cosmological Argument, Aquinas's Teleological Argument, and Anselm's Ontological Argument, see Geisler, *The Big Book of Christian Apologetics*.

Lastly, many participants perceived that Christians presumed to know what would convince them of the Christian God. One participant boldly stated, "You do not know what would convince me. An omniscient, omnipotent God does know what would convince me and has the ability to provide that evidence for me." Intellectual vulnerability readily concedes the point; Christians do not know what would convince anyone to believe, and to presume otherwise is dishonest and arrogant.

In sum, one participant astutely stated, "Life has shown me that we're always going to be asking questions," and intellectual vulnerability agrees.

Empathetic imagination. In an article entitled *The Sympathetic Imagination in Eighteenth-Century English Criticism*, Walter Jackson Bate describes authors' sympathetic imagination as "the insistence that the imagination, by an effort of sympathetic intuition, is able to penetrate the barrier which space puts between it and its object, and, by actually entering into the object, so to speak, secure a momentary but complete identification with it."[16] Later he writes, "We sympathize with what we know; and the wider our knowledge and experience, the wider is the scope of our sympathy and the juster [sic] and more it is in perceiving the character and significance of its object."[17]

Using Bate's definition of the term, this meta-theme could properly be referred to as "sympathetic imagination," but for some, "sympathetic" implies feelings of pity or sorrow. Empathy, on the other hand, is the "ability to understand and appreciate another person's feelings, experience," and the study's data reveals it is not sympathy, but empathy, that participants desire.[18] For example, one participant described his interaction with a Christian as follows: "It's the way that it came across. Like, 'Oh you poor atheist,

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[16] Walter Jackson Bate, "The Sympathetic Imagination in Eighteenth-Century English Criticism," *The John Hopkins Press University* 12, no. 2 (1945): 144.

[17] Bate, "The Sympathetic Imagination," 151.

[18] *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "empathy."

you don't know what I feel with God, and I just wish that I could share that with you.' And it's just like, 'I have a perfectly fulfilling life, thank you very much.'" Another participant stated, "They [Christians] have only lived in their life. They haven't lived in everybody else's bodies . . . maybe they'd be a bit more understanding if they took, like, a step into their shoes." Participants expressed the desire to be understood, known, and valued; so, for the purposes of this study the term "empathetic imagination" is used.

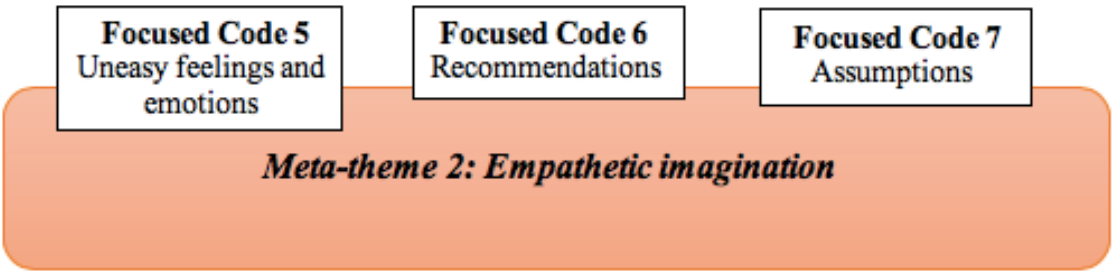

Figure 9. Meta-theme 2: Empathetic imagination

This desire to be understood, known, and valued could be heard in participants' suggesting that Christians practice "mindfulness" and "active listening." One participant described the essence of "mindfulness" as follows: "try to think of what other people might feel, people of other faiths and denominations, or people who have very different sort of upbringings and find themselves as secularists." Meanwhile, multiple participants shared experiences characterized by the antithesis of "active listening." One participant mentioned "people who will just get glassy eyed because they're formulating their next response" and experiences where Christians would "give a rhetoric and we'll respond, and they'll respond to something entirely different, because they're not listening to what we're saying."

In contrast, empathetic imagination involves sacrificial listening. The following exchange from one interview and the words of another participant following it, reveal the results of empathetic imagination.

Interviewee: I was in pain and crying out for help and didn't receive it. . . . In [sharing] that experience of seeking help, trying to get that help from God and not receiving it, the adult that I was talking to actually started crying on behalf of me and that was shocking to me, because I hadn't really considered it a story worth crying over.

Interviewer: Oh, wow. How does that make you feel?

Interviewee: It was, um, what's the word? "Solemn" isn't the right word, but it's like, it felt genuine if that makes sense. I felt like he was actually listening to what I was saying more than even I had listened to myself.

And the following participant stated, "When you're actively listening and you're trying to understand the person, a five-minute conversation will turn into a three-hour in-depth meaningful interaction. When you're actively listening and being mindful of the other person you cannot help but fall into a deep meaningful conversation."

The subtle assassin of empathetic imagination is the presumptuous imagination. The presumptuous imagination constructs a narrative of the other person and mutes the true story of that person. It says, *I know who you are*, without knowing who they are. And according to participants, Christians do not merely assume things about them, they assume the *worst* things about them. Participants stated Christians used words and phrases like "immoral," "don't care about important things," "don't know the difference between right and wrong," and "haven't thought very hard" to describe secularists. The presumptuous imagination creates a counterfeit and distorted characterization of the other person and replaces empathetic imagination.

Finally, empathetic imagination opens the door to steeped embodied discourse.

Steeped embodied discourse. In *Kierkegaard*, Patrick Gardiner succinctly summarizes the philosophy of Søren Kierkegaard which unifies empathetic imagination

with steeped embodied discourse.[19] According to Gardiner, Kierkegaard argued that "an individual's self-understanding and critical awareness could not be achieved by abstract instruction or the inculcation of salutary precepts: it might however, be assisted by entering imaginatively into his or her point of view, empathetically eliciting its emotional foundations."[20] However, Gardiner clarifies that such imagination should be "without the didacticism that was a characteristic of 'objective' modes of discourse."[21] He explains,

> His aim was not, in other words, to add to the sum of their propositional knowledge in the manner of a schoolmaster or an academic teacher, nor did he purport to "compel a person to accept an opinion, a conviction, a belief" in the autocratic style of some privileged authority. On the contrary, the idea was to approach people "from behind," maneuvering them into a position from which they themselves, as a result of interior reflection, could step back and make a radical choice between remaining where they were and opting for a fundamental change.[22]

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[19] Patrick Gardiner, *Kierkegaard: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

[20] Gardiner, *Kierkegaard,* 42. In *Training in Christianity*, Kierkegaard links the beauty of Christianity with Christ's invitation, "Come hither." He writes, "Ye who are despised and disdained, about whose existence none is concerned, not a single one, not even so much as for the beasts, which have a higher value!—Ye sick, lame, deaf, blind, crippled, come hither!—Ye bed-ridden, yea, come ye also hither! For the invitation makes bold to bid the bed-ridden . . . come!" Søren Kierkegaard, *Training in Christianity*: *And the Edifying Discourse Which 'Accompanied' It*, trans. Walter Lowrie (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1944), 16. Kierkegaard also discusses two ways humanity is affronted by the God-man, Jesus Christ:

> "The offence" in the strictest sense . . . has to do therefore with the God-man, and it has two forms. It either has to do with loftiness—one is offended at the fact that an individual man says of himself that he is God . . . or is has to do with lowliness—that He who is God is this lowly man, suffering like a lowly man. . . . In the first form, the offence arises in such a way that I am not in the least offended at the lowliness of the man but at the fact that he wants me to believe he is God. And if I have believed this, the offence then arises from the other side, and consists in the fact that such a one as He should be God, this lowly helpless man who when it comes to a test has no power to do anything. In one case the point of departure is man, and the offence is the determining concept God; in the other case the point of departure is God and the offence is the determining concept man. (Kierkegaard, *Training in Christianity*, 84)

In summation, the invitation of God—the lofty—is "come hither," *and* the invitation comes to humanity, face to face, in the form of a man—the lowly. Kierkegaard demonstrates a God who, as the God-man Jesus Christ, practiced steeped embodied discourse. He became embodied man to winsomely persuade and invite people into relationship with God. Thus, when Christians have winsome, face to face conversations with others about God, they imitate Christ, the God-man.

[21] Gardiner, *Kierkegaard,* 42.

[22] Gardiner, *Kierkegaard,* 42.

In other words, in keeping with the Socratic Method, Kierkegaard steered his readers away from a type of domineering, lecture-like monologue and into a kind of conversation saturated with thought-provoking questions, or simply, steeped embodied discourse.[23]

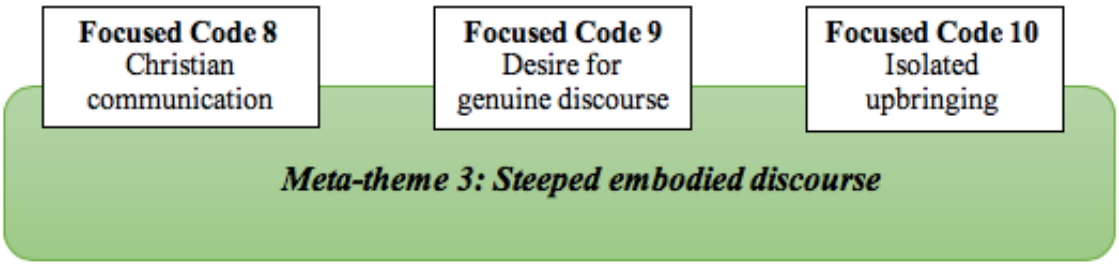

Figure 10. Meta-theme 3: Steeped embodied discourse

Steeped embodied discourse involves face-to-face, intellectually vulnerable conversations, and is without "the script" that participants described. One participant described his/her experience with Christians: "It's almost like they've got this scripted thing that they're going to say and you can't—they don't know what you're going to say, so either they can't let you talk or, if you do talk, I take them off script." Steeped embodied discourse prevents experiences like this and others where "people knew what they were supposed to say, but they no longer attached any real significance to the words they used."[24] Another participant had a similar experience but then described the experience he/she desired.

> I want my ideas to be challenged because I still want to make sure I have good reasons to believe the things that I do, and if I don't have a good reason to believe something then I want that to be pointed out, and I want to stop believing in it. That's what is really powerful about [names Wesleyan organization] because these are people genuinely wanting to understand what I think and genuinely trying to understand themselves better through these conversations.

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[23] Gardiner, *Kierkegaard,* 42.

[24] Gardiner, *Kierkegaard,* 39.

Later, the same participant boldly declared, “If your belief cannot stand up to the scrutiny of an in-depth meaningful conversation, it’s not a belief worth holding.”

Although participants expressed the desire for steeped embodied discourse with Christians, they also mentioned that “there wasn’t necessarily avenues to [such] discuss[ion].” According to most participants, Christians typically offered “spaces for believers, by believers,” rather than spaces for believers *and* non-believers to converse. The three participants who had experienced spaces open to both believers *and* non-believers described them positively. For example, one participant shared the experience of visiting a local Christian church along with other members of their chapter. The participant said, “And then we went to dinner afterwards, and there were people from [names the church] there to talk with us and continue that dialogue. And we talked, and I didn’t get home until 2:00 in the morning, because we were just talking and just engaging with people in this genuine conversation that was so powerful.”

The participants of this study, all members of Gen Z, want more than superficial conversation; they want steeped embodied discourse.

Interviewer: Is there anything else about your experience/your experiences that you’d want to share?

Interviewee: I mean, because I would love to talk to someone about—I mean that’s why I enjoy talking to you because I can finally say what I’ve gone—what I’ve been going through.

Interviewer: Kind of freeing isn’t it?

Interviewee: Yeah. It’s, like, freeing. Like, “Oh I get to say.”

In summation, steeped embodied discourse is the hands of intellectual vulnerability and empathetic imagination, and participants desire such interactions.

Time: The centerpiece of the study’s trinity. Time unifies the study’s trinity and, therefore, must be considered its centerpiece. Intellectual vulnerability, empathetic imagination, and steeped embodied discourse must be holistically combined and

marinated in time. When participants were asked if they perceived Christians as genuine, time affected their perceptions. For example, "It's harder to get a good read because I talked to them for five minutes." In contrast, "I think they were genuine and really cared. . . . I mean because they took their time to do that," and "I think they are genuinely there because they enjoy the conversations and they want to learn about us."

In summary, there is no method, formula or microwavable process capable of replacing the time required to engage others with intellectual vulnerability, empathetic imagination, and steeped embodied discourse. Without an investment of time, those encountering Christians will not share the experience of the participant who, as shared previously, said, "I didn't get home until 2:00 in the morning, because we were just talking and just engaging with people in this genuine conversation that was so powerful."

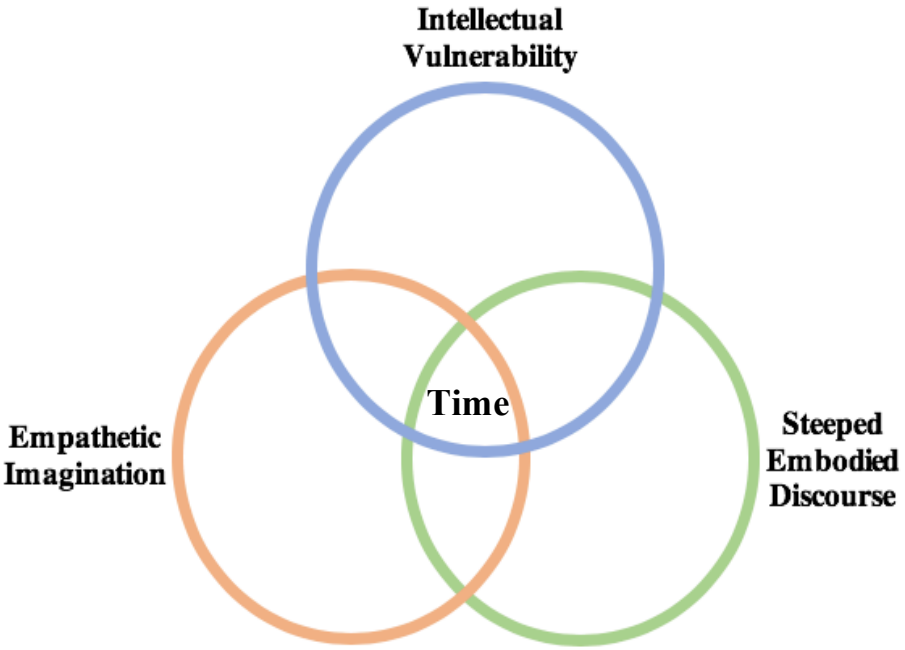

Figure 11. Time: The centerpiece of the study's trinity

Evaluation of Research Design

Strengths

The primary strength of the research design was its qualitative structure, because it allowed for extended discussion with participants. Participants stated they enjoyed the interview and, especially, answering "good questions" they had yet to consider. They appeared comfortable as they retold their experiences, even when detailing those they described as "uncomfortable" or "painful."

The conversations felt natural and fluid, flowing freely between solemn statements and quiet reflection, and participants routinely injected humor into the interviews. A number of participants characterized the interview as "therapeutic" and/or "freeing." On several occasions, conversation continued up to thirty minutes after an interview was completed. These conversations occurred as the participant and I finished our coffee and/or as he or she walked me back to my car. Because interviews were conducted in person, I was able to have lunch with the SSA officers of one university and this same chapter invited me to speak on my research during their bi-weekly meeting. Likewise, a second chapter invited me to attend an SSA brunch.

Every member of the SSA I encountered was kind, hospitable, and a pleasant conversationalist. Participants responded in timely fashion to communications prior to their scheduled interview and were punctual for their interview. As a result, the cooperation each SSA and participant provided, as well as the warm welcome I always received, must also be considered strengths of the design.

Weaknesses

Although the design yielded unanticipated institutional diversity, it was, nonetheless, geographically limited in two ways. The study was limited, initially, to the state of Texas and then to selected portions of the state. Only those geographic areas of the state that are home to institutions with SSA's are included in the study. The East, West, South and Panhandle regions were not included.

Third, the design did not consider the difficulty of obtaining type 2 data (journal entries, poetry, music, art, blog posts, etc.). Due to this oversight, the results of the study were restricted to a single point of data. Thus, a quantitative method for collecting additional data should have been considered in the research design to allow for two data collections and triangulation.

Conclusion

Overall, the research design was successful in gathering secular students' perceptions of Christian rhetoric. Data was methodically coded and carefully categorized thematically. Based on the analysis of findings, chapter 5 will analyze results based on the study's research purpose and questions, and in response, provide contributions to literature, recommendations for practice, applications of research, and suggest potential future research.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS

When C.S. Lewis's wife passed away, he kept a journal in which he wrote about his experience with grief. Later, his journal was compiled into a book titled, *A Grief Observed*.[1] In it, Lewis describes the feeling of his loss, exhaustion, and sadness – the kind of sadness that knots in the throat, the type one tries to swallow down to help settle his or her grief. But, Lewis writes, "I keep on swallowing."[2] Agonized by the death of his wife, Lewis searches for the meaning of his own suffering. And, in the last pages of his book, out of the chaos of his experience, Lewis, in a moment of respite, writes, "I have come to misunderstand a little less completely."[3]

After emails, phone calls, Facebook messages, road trips, data collection, transcribing, coding, and analyzing findings, one shares the sentiment of Lewis, that the Christian community will "come to misunderstand a little less completely" the experiences of the study's participants.[4]

This chapter (1) reexamines the research purpose and questions, (2) details analysis of results, (3) provides recommendations and applications for Christian rhetorical praxis, and (4) outlines future research.

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[1] C. S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed* (New York: Harper Collins, 2015).

[2] Lewis, *A Grief Observed*, 3.

[3] Lewis, *A Grief Observed*, 75.

[4] Lewis, *A Grief Observed*, 75.

Research Purpose and Questions

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand how secular, Gen Z, college students have experienced the phenomenon of Christian rhetoric. In an effort to increase understanding of participants' experiences with the phenomenon, open-ended questions were used. Additionally, participants were asked to provide any other personal materials they deem applicable to the study.[5] Once data was gathered, coded, and analyzed, it was interpreted and used to shape Christian rhetorical praxis. The following research questions directed the study:

1. What are secular students' perceptions of their experiences with the phenomenon of Christian rhetoric?

Sub Questions

1. What role do the elements of logos, including choice of language and reason, play in secular students' perceptions of Christian rhetoric?
2. What role do the elements of pathos, including sympathetic imagination, inquiry, and openness play in secular students' perceptions of Christian rhetoric?[6]
3. What role do the elements of ethos, including trustworthiness, attentiveness, and decorum play in secular students' perceptions of Christian rhetoric?
4. What role does understanding one's audience play in secular students' perceptions of Christian rhetoric?

Analysis of Results

Drawing from the analysis of findings in chapter 4, the following section will examine the implications of the data for the elements of rhetoric as stated in the research sub-questions.

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[5] John Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing among Five Approaches*, 3rd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2013), 81; Johnny Saldaña, *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*, 3rd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2016), 3-4.

[6] While the research sub question used the term sympathetic imagination, findings revealed participants longed for empathetic imagination. Hence, empathetic imagination was used in the analysis of findings. See chap. 4, pp. 78-80 for further explanation.

Implications of Sub Question 1

What role do the elements of logos, including choice of language and reason, play in secular students' perceptions of Christian rhetoric? Christians and their message were considered largely illogical, and as such, Christian rhetoric was often considered implausible. Participants frequently mentioned the doctrine of hell, creationism, Christ's substitutionary death, God's sovereignty, and human free will as cognitively problematic. However, when Christians attempted to address these issues, they were perceived as either dogmatically certain or disinterested, and participants believed the disinterest was a deliberate mask for ignorance. In both cases, participants perceived Christians sidestepped the argument, although in different ways. The dogmatic person avoided the participants' logos by talking *at* them rather than *with* them. On the other hand, participants believed the seemingly disinterested person avoided the argument completely. Consequently, Christian logos was perceived as polarizing.

Furthermore, participants perceived Christian apologetics as impenetrable as well as invulnerable and, consequently, deterrents to sharing their reasons for disbelief or asking questions. The primary reason participants muted their own secular logos was their fear of rejection.

Additionally, Christians' source of knowledge, the Bible, was considered an illogical mythology. Thus, when Christians used selected portions of the Bible to support their logic, it was almost instantly dismissed as a source of logical support for the Christian faith (to be discussed further in "Implications of Sub Question 3").

Although the study's findings agreed with the existing literature in many respects, it also offered new insights into Christians' use of logos. For example, Timothy Keller's *Reason for God* addresses several of the most frequent comments and questions posed by the study's participants: *There can't just be one true religion. How could God allow suffering? The church is responsible for so much injustice. How can a loving God*

send people to hell? Science has disproved Christianity. You can't take the Bible literally.[7]

In *Finding Truth: 5 Principles for Unmasking Atheism, Secularism, and Other God Substitutes*, Nancy Pearcey addresses the human desire to dialogue about these issues/matters. She quotes one of her students as follows: "What I hear at my church are 'feel good' messages. But I don't want to feel good. I want to wrestle with difficult questions."[8] The study's findings confirmed this sentiment; participants want to engage in rigorous, logical dialogue *with* Christians, but they want to do so without fear of rejection. However, while participants expressed a desire to wrestle with difficult questions, they also suggested such struggle is unwelcome in Christian churches and ministries; in the best of circumstances, struggle was merely frowned upon, but in others it was deemed wholly unacceptable.

In addition, while the study's findings aligned with existing literature, it also revealed a need for literature that will contextualize and logically address additional questions posed by secular, Gen Z, college students; *How do you explain the malevolent acts of God in the Bible as ultimately benevolent? What makes faith a reliable epistemology? How do you reconcile an omnipotent God with freewill? How do you reconcile an omniscient God and prayer?* These questions, and others like them, require the Christian community to respond with clarity and poise.

In conclusion, while the body of existing literature does not address the unique characteristics and questions of Gen Z, it does provide sufficient logical support for addressing the major objections secularists have to Christianity. However, the study's findings also indicate Christians are either unfamiliar with this literature or, if familiar with it, present what they know in a poor manner.

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[7] Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism* (New York: Dutton, 2008), ix.

[8] Nancy Pearcey, *Finding Truth: 5 Principles for Unmasking Atheism, Secularism, and Other God Substitutes* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2015), 59.

Implications of Sub Question 2

What role do the elements of pathos, including sympathetic imagination, inquiry, and openness play in secular students' perceptions of Christian rhetoric? While participants connected a variety of emotions to their experiences with Christian rhetoric, the two most prevalent were discomfort and fear. These feelings were most commonly used to describe interactions with either Christian strangers or Christian family members. In other words, participants experienced greatest discomfort and fear with those whom they were most unfamiliar or with those whom they were most familiar. With strangers, the fear was rooted in the unknown, while with family members fear was rooted in the possibility of disappointing and/or being rejected by those who love them most.

Participants also felt marginalized, isolated, and/or pained by at least one experience. However, in instances where Christians demonstrated empathy for participants, participants felt known, safe, and comfortable to be vulnerable; it was here that participants described Christians as loving.

The apostle Paul urges Christians to share the gospel in "purity . . . patience, kindness . . . genuine love; by truthful speech, and the power of God" (2 Cor 6:2, 3, 6, 7). Os Guinness echoes this biblical expression of pathos, "It is said rightly, 'love is the final apologetic,' in the sense that our best argument is our love for the people we talk to. But that is not the end of the insistence on love. Love is the 'alpha and the omega of apologetics,' in the sense that all we say must come from love, and it must lead to love and to the One who is love."[9] It is worth repeating one participant here: "If you want me to believe your thing, maybe don't be an a*****e to me. . . . It is a barrier. I would listen to more of these arguments if they weren't told to me as though I was an idiot." *I would listen to more of these arguments if they weren't told me to as though I was an idiot.* Love is not just the peak of pathos, love is who God is and he has commanded his

[9] Os Guinness, *Fool's Talk: Recovering the Art of Christian Persuasion* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2015), 45.

followers to be the embodiment of love in a lost world.[10] However, the study's findings revealed Christians were rarely perceived as demonstrating the kind of love presented in the Bible; instead of inspiring the hope, joy, and awe of Christ, Christians contributed to the already acute sense of isolation experienced by the "loneliest generation" in history by creating an atmosphere where questions are unwelcome and people fear rejection.[11]

Implications of Sub Question 3

What role do the elements of ethos, including trustworthiness, attentiveness, and decorum play in secular students' perceptions of Christian rhetoric? Participants' descriptions of Christian character varied based on their experience(s). Participants perceived Christians' motivation to share their message to be rooted in love for the participant and the hope for their salvation, as well as obedience to God. However, in many cases, Christian ethos was perceived as disingenuous, arrogant, and condescending. The most common recommendation participants had for Christians was that they just be kind and respectful, an indication Christians were often perceived as neither.

Additionally, several participants commented that Christians did not sincerely engage in dialogue but were simply pushing a script. Contrastingly, in experiences of shared discourse, participants described Christians as caring, trustworthy, and perceptive.

Lastly, the ethos of the Bible was questioned by all participants with remarks like "contradictory" and "inconsistent" featuring prominently. Also, participants believed Christians only had a piecemeal knowledge of the Bible and this only contributed further to their lack of trust in it.

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[10] Matt 22:36-40; John 15:12; 1 John 4:8.

[11] Luke 5:26, 24:21, Matt 27:54, 28:8; Behavioral Health, "2018 Cigna Loneliness Index: Survey of 20,000 Americans Examining Behaviors Driving Loneliness in the United States," Cigna, 2018, https://www.multivu.com/players/English/8294451-cigna-us-loneliness-survey/docs/IndexReport_1524069371598-173525450.pdf, 6.

Aristotle called ethos "the most effective means of persuasion he [the rhetorician] possesses," and Ryan N. S. Topping notes, "We forget, that if you wish others to believe you, they must first like you, or at least not think you odious. The more you expect from your listener, the more they will require of your character."[12] These two rhetoricians consider ethos the apex of the rhetorical triad, but participants in the study suggested Christians did not comprehend this.

Participants did not expect Christians to be perfect; they expected them to be honest, loving, and vulnerable rather than inauthentic, arrogant and cognitively impenetrable. These latter characteristics are incongruous with the very foundation of Christianity which is built on the perfect ethos of another, Jesus Christ, one who was "mighty in deed and word," whose ethos and speech were in perfect harmony (Luke 24:19). Yet Christians, those who confess their own shortcomings and profess belief in the perfect embodiment of ethos, Jesus Christ, were perceived as condescending, rude, blindly hypocritical, and, thus, failing to establish an ethos consistent with the biblical metanarrative and Christian rhetorical literature.

According to Holly Ordway, "Stories have the merit of being relational"; the more vividly a story is told, the more likely the audience "will want to 'inhabit' that story and experience" the affections of the characters themselves.[13] The study revealed that Christians failed to communicate the grand narrative, or macro story, of the Bible (Creation, Fall, Redemption, Restoration) in a holistic fashion, and the same was true for micro stories like Abraham and Isaac, the Woman at the Well, or the Prodigal Son. The Bible is one grand story, consisting of many micro stories, casting the history of the human race as its characters; if it is presented as nothing more than a series of propositional truths, the engaging ethos of the story is lost.

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[12] Aristotle, *The Art of Rhetoric*, trans. W. Rhys Roberts, accessed November 15, 2017, http://www.wendelberger.com/downloads/Aristotle_Rhetoric.pdf,, 11; Ryan N. S. Topping, *The Elements of Rhetoric: How to Write and Speak Clearly and Persuasively* (Kettering, OH: Angelico Press, 2016), 29.

[13] Holly Ordway, *Apologetics and the Christian Imagination: An Integrated Approach to Defending the Faith* (Steubenville, OH: Emmaus Road, 2017), 107, 108.

Implications of Sub Question 4

What role does understanding one's audience play in secular students' perceptions of Christian rhetoric? Participants perceived that Christians made numerous assumptions about them. The two most pervasive assumptions were that participants hated God and lacked morality. Participants' responses to such assumptions were they did not hate God because there was no God to hate and they were morally "good without God." As a result of these assumptions and others, participants believed they were largely misunderstood by Christians.

Participants also mentioned Christians did not just fail to ask thought-provoking questions, but that Christians generally did not ask any questions. Instead, participants perceived Christians more intent on being heard and understood, sometimes in a domineering manner, than hearing and understanding participants' beliefs or seeing the soul behind the label of "secularist."

Guinness writes, "Every single person is unique and individual and deserves an approach that respects that uniqueness," and according to James Emery White, Christian rhetoric for Gen Z must contain stories and pictures, God's inclusiveness of the nations, sympathetic imagination, contextualization, and questions concerning the universe and the existence of God.[14]

Furthermore, Jesus often reasoned with people using parables, metaphors, and questions, contextualizing his message to those with whom he communicated; in short, Jesus saw people and listened to them, and he tailored his message accordingly.[15] However, the study's findings indicate Christians neither heed the suggestions of Guinness and White nor do they follow Jesus' rhetorical example. For instance, when asked why they were willing to participate in the study, several participants indicated they wanted their voice heard and people to know they exist. However, the study's

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[14] Guinness, *Fool's Talk*, 33; James Emery White, *Meet Generation Z: Understanding and Reaching the New Post-Christian World* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2017), 107-128.

[15] Luke 15; Matt 12:22-28, 13:1-20, 22:1-14; Mark 12:13-17.

findings indicate Christians are not the ears that listen and the eyes that see and, because they have failed to be so, they do not understand their audience.

Recommendations for Practice and Application

In *Wisdom and Eloquence*, Robert Littlejohn and Charles T. Evans address the liberal art, dialectic. The authors write, "*Dialektike* denotes an artistic skill for which we have natural aptitude but that is not inherent to us at birth—it must be learned. Literally, it is the art of 'talking things through.'"[16] Similarly, intellectual vulnerability, empathetic imagination, and steeped embodied discourse cannot be taught and learned in a vacuum, they are practiced, by literally "talking things through."

The study's trinity of intellectual vulnerability, empathetic imagination, and steeped embodied discourse are lifestyle liturgies rooted in the study's centerpiece of time. The study's trinity are not formulaic, mechanical, step-by-step processes; they are holistic. Consequently, while four distinct recommendations will follow, they should not be considered independently; they are united, and due to the holistic nature of the study's trinity, each recommendation will contain multiple rhetorical elements.

Engage Others Face to Face and Invest Time

God's winsome empathy in the person of Christ is astonishing; the Creator, who with masterful poise created the universe with his breath, becomes human and literally sees eye-to-eye with his creation, not to condemn them but to save them (John 3:17). In short, the eternal Son of God enters time and space to invest time in a myriad of spaces, marked by relational habits with others. In the New Testament, Jesus is often found reclining at a table with people of questionable character, people who found their

[16] Robert Litteljohn and Charles T. Evans, *Wisdom and Eloquence: A Christian Paradigm for Classical Learning* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006), 108.

identity in anything and everything but God.[17] He welcomed them to the place where he stayed, and he visited their homes, marketplaces, and places of worship.[18] From town to town, passing through or lodging, Jesus invested time. In short, he winsomely engaged people face to face.

In a similar fashion, Christians should embody Christ's example and invite Gen Z to the table of their lives. By welcoming people into the spaces of one's life through a shared meal with family and/or roommates, a cup of coffee/tea, a walk in the park, or even a trip to the grocery store, Christians offer people a face-to-face presence, one for which Gen Z yearns.

At times participants described their spiritual journey as a lonely endeavor. Astutely, David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons write, "Christians must not be hard-hearted toward those who seek alternate identities. Their quest is a signpost pointing to a deep desire to be truly, profoundly known."[19] Simply, people long to be known and loved by others, and Christian love must see people, lean close to ask questions, and listen to the story of others, no matter what that story might be; "Has a friend confessed his addiction to porn? He is a person to be loved. Did your daughter come out as a lesbian? She is a person to be loved. Has someone in your church gotten pregnant outside of marriage? She is a mom to be loved."[20] No matter the story, Christians should sacrificially listen, remembering people are to be loved rather than an "issue to be solved."[21] Lewis writes, "There's always a card in his hand we didn't know about. . . . We all think we've got one

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[17] Matt 9:10; Mark 2:15; Luke 7:36-50; John 4.

[18] Matt 13:54; Mark 6:56; John 1:39.

[19] David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, *Good Faith: Being a Christian When Society Thinks You're Irrelevant and Extreme* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2017), 189.

[20] Kinnaman and Lyons, *Good Faith,* 191-93.

[21] Kinnaman and Lyons, *Good Faith,* 193.

another taped."[22] In other words, people tend to think they have everyone figured out, but the reality is, there is always a corner of someone's life that people have yet to peer around. When people were at their most vulnerable and fearing rejection, Jesus routinely entered those spaces and alleviated their fear. He had conversations with promiscuous women, invalids, demonized men, the blind, and groups of mourners; he knew them, entered their stories, loved them and ultimately called them out of their stories and into his story.[23]

When Jesus used metaphors, stories, and language familiar to his audience, he was being more than rhetorically accommodating; he was demonstrating empathetic imagination.[24] He tailored his message for the people he encountered, treated them as unique individuals, and "never spoke to two people the same way."[25] For example, to the spiritually blind and lost, Jesus metaphorically referred to himself as "the light of the world" and "the good shepherd."[26] Additionally, in the presence of Pharisees and "sinners," he referred to himself as the doctor of the sick.[27] Jesus did not assume things about people, he knew people, and personalized his words to meet the needs of those people. So, too, must Christians.

Likewise, Christians must be spiritually authentic and intellectually vulnerable, willing to share the cards in their own hands by letting people peer around the corner of their own lives. This kind of vulnerability makes it possible to both know someone and to be known by someone, because to be vulnerable is to comprehend one's own fractured,

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[22] Lewis, *A Grief Observed,* 67.

[23] John 4:7-26, 5:3, 8:2-11, 9, 11.

[24] John 1:1; Eph 1:21; Phil 2:9.

[25] Guinness, *Fool's Talk*, 33;

[26] John 8:12, 10:11.

[27] Matt 9:11-12.

but shared, humanity. Very simply, Christians are not the savior, they are men and women needing a savior just as much as any other man or woman. It is worth repeating Brené Brown here, "Most of us don't trust perfect and that's a good instinct."[28] The façade of perfection is untrustworthy, because in a fallen world, perfection does not exist.

Intellectual vulnerability includes the admission of imperfection, humbly asking difficult questions, raising biblical concerns, and inquiring about confusing theology. While seemingly counterintuitive, participants regarded such vulnerability as trustworthy, refreshing, and safe.

As much as one might desire to express his or her life and theology in an organized, systematized spreadsheet, the world is untidy, confusing, and broken, and with it, the human race. However, it is only with intellectual vulnerability and a humble spirit that room for conversations about a redeemed world become possible. Without intellectual vulnerability and spiritual humility, conversations about the hope of a redeemed world via a perfect seed that, while laid in a tomb two-thousand years ago, would, three days later, sprout from the grave to make all things right and new again are impossible.[29]

Know *the* Story, Meditate on *the* Story, Share *the* Story

Participants often faulted Christians for taking a piecemeal approach to the Bible and, as result, did not trust Christians' use or knowledge of the Bible. The biblical

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[28] Dan Schawbel, "Brené Brown: How Vulnerability Makes Our Lives Better," *Forbes*, April 21, 2013, https://www.forbes.com/sites/danschawbel/2013/04/21/brene-brown-how-vulnerability-can-make-our-lives-better/ - 562b857e36c7.

[29] The following are resources devoted to engaging others face to face and investing time: Gregory Boyle, *Tattoos on the Heart: The Power of Boundless Compassion* (New York: Free Press, 2010); Brené Brown, *Daring Greatly: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead* (New York: Avery, 2012); Rosaria Champagne Butterfield, *The Gospel Comes with a House Key: Practicing Ordinary Hospitality in Our Post Christian World* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018); C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (New York: Harper Collins, 1960); Ann Voskamp, *The Broken Way: A Daring Path into the Abundant Life* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016).

storyline should not be presented disjointedly; rather the gospel needs to be shared within the seamless plotline in which God embedded it. The Christian meta-story beckons humanity into the story for which they were originally fashioned and Gen Z, consisting of twice as many atheists as any other generation, needs to hear this story. Furthermore, as ambassadors of Christ and his Kingdom, those entrusted with the "ministry of reconciliation," Christian men and women must be the story's winsome storytellers (2 Cor 5:18-20). However, in order to share the story, one must learn the story. And, in order to learn the story, one must know the story.

Biblical theology, expressed as God's story, mirrors the narrative arc of any other story: Creation (exposition), Fall (conflict and rising action), Redemption (climax and falling action), and Restoration (resolution). God, as master Storyteller, thickens his rising action with a myriad of types and shadows and becomes one who subsequently steps into his own narrative as the climax, antitype, and pinnacle of human history so that he might endure the cross and purchase salvation and a covenant relationship with his people.

At any point along the arc, Christians are able to point to Christ as the climax of the plotline. For example, stories in the Old Testament like Abraham and Isaac (Gen 22) and the book of Jonah serve as shadows of Christ's sacrifice and resurrection.

Jesus interpreted his life in light of the grand story: "And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself" (Luke 24:27). Similarly, the epistles of the New Testament find their meaning in Christ. For example, "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" points the reader back to the reason why there is no condemnation, Christ's work on the cross (Rom 8:1).

In short, understanding the Bible as story allows for all of it to be read Christologically, with Christ as the focal point. This is essential; creationism is not the focal point of the Bible. LGBTQ is not the focal point of the Bible. Gender roles are not

the center point of the Bible. The meaning of "predestination" is not the focal point of the Bible. Jesus is.

And in the meta-plotline, Jesus Christ is lifted up and exalted above all things. Christian men and women must familiarize themselves with this macro story over and above the memorization of isolated verses, because a holistic understanding provides the proper context for all micro stories of the Bible.

Christians must first meditate upon this story and then find their place in it because it is inside the story where they discover who they truly are and for whom they are truly made. Then, with hearts overflowing, they will be compelled to be the story's best storytellers. It is through face-to-face encounters with these storytellers that others will hear Christ's invitation and take their place in his story so that they, too, might know who they truly are and for whom they were truly made.[30]

Think Rigorously and Discourse Graciously

In knowing, meditating on, and sharing the meta-story, innumerable questions, concerns, and seemingly contradictory passages will surface. It is here that the Christian must learn to embrace what James Sire calls "the intellectual life."[31] He writes,

> An intellectual is one who loves ideas, is dedicated to clarifying them, developing them, criticizing them, turning them over and over, seeing their implications, stacking them atop one another, arranging them, sitting silent while new ideas pop up and old ones seem to rearrange themselves, playing with them, punning with their terminology, laughing at them, watching them clash, picking up the pieces, starting over, judging them, withholding judgment about them, changing them,

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[30] To help know, learn, and share the story, the following resources are recommended: T. Desmond Alexander, *From Eden to the New Jerusalem: An Introduction to Biblical Theology* (Nottingham, England: IVP, 2008); Guinness, *Fool's Talk*; Sally Lloyd-Jones, *The Jesus Storybook Bible: Every Story Whispers His Name* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007); Ordway, *Apologetics and the Christian*; Vaughan Roberts, *God's Big Picture: Tracing the Storyline of the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2002).

[31] James W. Sire, *Habits of the Mind: Intellectual Life as a Christian Calling* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2000).

> bringing them to dine and have a ball but also suiting them for a service of life. A *Christian intellectual* is all of the above to the glory of God.[32]

Christians must think rigorously and discourse graciously about the world, humanity, the Bible, God's character, etc. They must embrace biblical literacy, wrestle with hermeneutics, ask thought-provoking questions, and must be willing to dialogue about ostensibly irreconcilable doctrine. *If God is loving, is eternal hell fair? What does it mean to be a human being? If God is good, why is there unimaginable suffering? What does it mean to know? What do other religions believe and why? Is theistic evolution plausible? What should be considered literal, metaphorical, and cultural in the Bible?* These cavernous questions and others like them should be explored, studied, and discussed over dinner, in books clubs, small groups/Sunday school, and corporate gatherings for youth, college, and adults. In doing so, Christians will be accepting the challenge of one participant who said, "If your belief cannot stand up to the scrutiny of an in-depth meaningful conversation, it's not a belief worth holding."

Critically, this steeped embodied discourse must be hemmed in love and safeguarded from pride. Biblically speaking, without love Christian rhetoric is obnoxious, "a noisy gong or a clanging symbol" (1 Cor 13:1). Furthermore, "'knowledge' puffs up" and Christian dogmatists, poisoned by pride, suffocate the conversation and, as described by Sire, "get so enamored of their own brilliance that they become nothing more than sophisticated, arrogant prigs."[33] The proud Christian makes himself or herself the conversational center and authority, uncompromisingly certain and arrogant in the sufficiency of their own reason. Pride does not allow opportunities for clarification, development, or criticism; it shudders at them. Pride does not withhold judgment; it judges with no thought of grace. Pride does not "dine and have a ball" because its backside is too tightly fixed to the chair of its own superiority that it cannot dance with

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[32] Sire, *Habits of the Mind,* 28.

[33] Sire, *Habits of the Mind*, 26.

ideas "less endowed" than its own.[34] In contrast, Christians must imitate their Savior, "full of grace and truth" (John 1:14).[35]

Create Spaces for Metaphysical Conversations

In the words of Mark Twain, "Travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry and narrow-mindedness, and many of our people need it sorely on these accounts. Broad, wholesome, charitable views of men and things can not [sic] be acquired by vegetating in one little corner of the earth all one's lifetime."[36] A majority of participants expressed something akin to Twain when they mentioned Christians offered "spaces for believers by believers" exclusively, thus resulting in a Christian "echo chamber." However, three participants attended Christian churches and/or organizations who offered small group discussions involving open-ended questions about theology, philosophy, and worldview—and all three described their experiences positively.

To paraphrase Twain, spiritual, emotional and intellectual travel are fatal to intellectual arrogance, a lack of empathy, and an unwillingness to dialogue. To experience religious and worldview diversity, Christians must extend themselves to people unlike them and this can be done in two ways.

First, Christians can create safe places for intentional discourse and then invite, not just other Christians, but individuals of other faiths to join the conversation. For example, a college ministry could host a "night of apologetics" with challenging

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[34] Sire, *Habits of the Mind*, 28.

[35] To help think rigorously and discourse graciously, the following resources are recommended: Timothy Keller, *Making Sense of God: An Invitation to the Skeptical* (New York: Viking, 2016); Keller, *The Reason for God*; C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Harper Collins, 1952); Robert L. Plummer, 40 *Questions about Interpreting the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2010); James W. Sire, *The Universe Next Door* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2009).

[36] Mark Twain, *The Innocents Abroad: Or the New Pilgrim's Progress* (Hartford, CT: American Publishing, 1879), 650.

questions for small groups to discuss. A youth group could invite someone with a different faith to host a discussion group about their beliefs.

Second, instead of creating such spaces, Christians could enter spaces considered safe by those of other faiths. For example, one church's small group could visit either a different place of worship or a different faith organization such as an Islamic student center, Buddhist temple, Hindu festival, or Jewish synagogue. A college ministry could ask to meet with an SSA or attend a meeting to discuss philosophy, theology, and worldview. In each of the mentioned examples, churches and/or organizations should offer a time for debrief and questions.[37]

Application of Research

The study offers insight into participants' current perceptions of Christians and their message. Such insight will contribute to better contextualization of the gospel message for the study's population and improve Christian rhetorical praxis.

In particular, the need for the study's trinity of intellectual vulnerability, empathetic imagination, and steeped embodied discourse must be emphasized wherever Christian rhetorical praxis is developed. This would include, but not be limited to, the following settings:

1. Church (Sunday school, equipping classes, college and youth groups, etc.)
2. College ministries (CRU, Navigators, Campus Outreach, Baptist Student Ministry, Chi Alpha, etc.)
3. Christian educational institutions (high schools, universities, and seminaries, etc.)
4. Mission organizations (Go Now Missions, North American Mission Board, etc.)

[37] The following are recommended resources for encouraging rigorous thinking and gracious discourse: Oso Logos: Christian Apologetics, Wordpress, accessed August 1, 2019, https://osologos.wordpress.com; Alpha International, "About," accessed August 9, 2019, https://alphausa.org/about; Timothy Keller, *Reason for God: Conversations on Faith and Life,* DVD (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010).

Future Research

Research addressing this study's research question and sub-questions is minimal. The following section suggests three viable proposals to build on the current study's analysis of findings and results.

First, the results from this study should be used to formulate an instrument for a quantitative design. For example, a Likert scale could be developed and disseminated to a larger population, like university SSA's nationally. Such a quantitative study would facilitate the collection and subsequent correlation of demographic information including gender, race, ethnicity and geographic location with the qualitative component of the study.

Second, an exploratory mixed methods study should be designed to research Christians' perceptions of secular rhetoric. The research and interview questions in the current study would be modified to accommodate such a study (i.e. What does it mean for you to identify as a Christian? What is one of your most notable experiences with a secularist?). The results of this proposed study would then be compared to the results of the current study.

Lastly, several exploratory mixed methods study should be designed to assess how Christian rhetoric is perceived by people of other faiths. For example, what are Muslims', Buddhists', and Jews' perceptions of Christian rhetoric? Furthermore, this mixed methods study should be conducted both domestically and internationally and subsequently compared.

Conclusion

This section examined the implications of research questions, offered recommendations and applications for Christian rhetorical praxis, and summarized options for possible future research. Most importantly, this final section sought to help Christians misunderstand participants a little less completely, so they can become the

winsome storytellers of God's grand narrative by telling that story with intellectual vulnerability, empathetic imagination, and steeped embodied discourse.

In her 1990 communications study, Elizabeth Newton studied "tappers" and "listeners" and learned that "tappers" grossly overestimated the success of their tapping. What "tappers" thought they were successfully communicating was not what listeners were hearing. In a similar manner, this study sought to determine whether Christians "tapped" the Gospel clearly, and the analysis of findings suggests this is not happening.[38] May Christians take the steps necessary to tap the beautiful rhythm of the Gospel clearly so that it will teach, move, and delight listeners in such a way that they would see relationship with the living Jesus Christ, the Master Rhetorician, and the one who compassionately beckons all peoples to his table of grace.

[38] Elizabeth Newton, "The Rocky Road from Actions to Intentions" (PhD diss., Stanford University, 1990).

APPENDIX 1

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What does it mean for you to identify as a secularist? Why do you identify as a secularist? What led you to becoming a secularist?

2. When you think about your experiences with Christians who have tried to persuade you of their beliefs…

    a. What is one of your most notable experiences?

    b. What is a more typical experience?

    c. Have you had other similar conversations you'd like to share with me?

3. Overall, what did you think and feel about the experience(s)? What was it about the experience that led you to think or feel this way?

4. Did what they share make sense? What did or did not?

5. Did they use any words or phrases that stood out to you?

6. Did they refer to the Bible in the conversation? In what way? What do you think of the Bible?

7. Did they use stories, metaphors, or illustrations in the conversation? If so, can you remember them and your reaction to them?

8. Were you comfortable talking with this person? Did they seem comfortable talking with you? What gave you that impression?

9. What was your opinion of the person?

10. What do you think motivated them to talk to you? Do you think they were genuine?

11. Do you think the they were trying to understand your views? Why or why not?

12. Do you think they had assumptions about you or your beliefs? What do you think those assumptions were?

13. Do you think they asked thought-provoking questions? If so, what were those questions?

14. Would you characterize the Christian's approach as effective in any way? In what ways?

15. What effect, if any, did the experience have on you?

16. What do you think it would take for you to be persuaded that Christianity is true?

17. What recommendations would you have, if any, for Christians about communicating their faith?

18. If each of your experiences were a chapter in a book, what would you title each chapter? What would you title the book?[1]

19. Is there anything else about your experience(s) that you would like to share?

[1] Janice M. Morse recommends having participants title their experiences, because doing so both encapsulates their experience(s) and aids in the coding process. Janice M. Morse, "Sampling in Grounded Theory," in *The Sage Handbook of Grounded Theory*, ed. A. Bryant and K. Charmaz (London: Sage, 2007), 237. See also Johnny Saldaña, *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*, 3rd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2016), 253.

APPENDIX 2

INITIAL CONTACT EMAIL

[University Name] SSA,

My name is Lauren Sierra, and I am doctoral candidate at Southern Seminary. For my dissertation, I am hoping to explore secular university students' perceptions of Christians/Christianity and the way Christians share their faith. In short, the research will seek to interview several participants from SSA's across the state of Texas and ask questions like, "As Christians have shared their faith with you, what are your perceptions of them and the content shared? Does the content seem logical to you? Why or why not?"

I would love for [University] to be a part of this, to listen and learn from your members' experiences. Would you let me know if your organization would be interested in participating in something like this? If so, I would love to talk with you more in depth!

Thank you for your time,

Lauren Sierra
[Number]

APPENDIX 3

SSA CRITERIA, INCENTIVE, AND ANONYMITY FORM

SSA Criteria, Incentive, and Anonymity

Criteria:

Each SSA will supply a roster of willing participants and each roster will consist of potential participants meeting the following criteria:

1. Must be enrolled as an undergraduate at the selected university.
2. Cannot be born prior to 1995.
3. Must identify as a member of the Secular Student Alliance.
4. Must have experienced the phenomenon of Christian rhetoric. For the purposes of the study, the experience(s) require(s) conversation involving Christian truth claims and the conversation must meet one or both of the following criteria:

    c. One-on-one conversation with a Christian who attempts to persuade the participant that Christian truth claims are credible.
    d. Conversations with groups consisting of less than ten people in which one or more members of the group attempt to persuade the participant that Christian truth claims are credible.

The following do not meet the criteria for experiencing the phenomenon of Christian rhetoric in this study:

- Conversations with one or more Christians which do not include Christian truth claims.
- Attending a church service(s), event(s), and/or function(s) without subsequent conversation including Christian truth claims with one of more Christians.
- Attending a campus ministry service(s), event(s), and/or function(s) without subsequent conversation including Christian truth claims with one of more Christians.
- Street preaching.
- Groups of more than 10 people.

Incentive:

Each participant (2 from each university) in the proposed study will receive a $50 Amazon Gift Card.

Anonymity:

The participants' responses will not be linked with the participants' identity.

APPENDIX 4

PARTICIPANT SELECTION EMAIL

Good afternoon, [Name].

My name is Lauren Sierra, and I am a doctoral student at Southern Seminary. Recently, I spoke with your SSA president regarding my research efforts, which consists of understanding secular students' perceptions of Christians sharing their faith with them.

You, and another member from your university, have been selected to participate in the study.

If you are willing, I would like to meet you on campus sometime in the month of April for a face-to-face interview. I estimate each interview lasting 1-2 hours, and in appreciation for your time, you will receive a $50.00 Amazon Gift Card.

Please respond to this email within the next week to confirm or deny participation. Upon your confirmation, we will agree on a date, time, and place for the interview. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me.

I am looking forward to your response! Sincerely,

Lauren Sierra
[Number]

APPENDIX 5

AGREEMENT TO PARTICIPATE FORM

Agreement to Participate

The research in which you are about to participate is designed to understand your experiences with Christians sharing their faith with you. This research is being conducted by Lauren Sierra for the purpose of understanding how secular, Gen-Z college students have experienced the phenomenon of Christian rhetoric. In this research, you will be asked to answer open-ended questions regarding your experience(s) with Christians and their shared message. Any information you provide will be held *strictly confidential,* and at no time will your name be reported, or your name identified with your responses. *Participation in this study is totally voluntary and you are free to withdraw from the study at any time.*

By your completion of this interview you are giving informed consent for the use of your responses in this research.

APPENDIX 6

ANALYTIC MEMO FORM

Participant: _____ University/Location: _____ Date: _____

Agreement to Participate: ____ Amazon Gift Card: ____ Sound Check: ____

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS	**NOTES**
What does it mean for you to identify as a secularist? Why do you identify as a secularist? What led you to becoming a secularist? When you think about your experiences with Christians who have tried to persuade you of their beliefs… a. What is one of your most notable experiences? b. What is a more typical experience? c. Have you had other similar conversations you'd like to share with me? Overall, what did you think and feel about the experience(s)? What was it about the experience that led you to think or feel this way? Did what they share make sense? What did or did not? Did they use any words or phrases that stood out to you? Did they refer to the Bible in the conversation? In what way? What do you think of the Bible?	

Did they use stories, metaphors, or illustrations in the conversation? If so, can you remember them and your reaction to them?

Were you comfortable talking with this person? Did they seem comfortable talking with you? What gave you that impression?

What was your opinion of the person?

What do you think motivated them to talk to you? Do you think they were genuine?

Do you think the they were trying to understand your views? Why or why not?

Do you think they had assumptions about you or your beliefs? What do you think those assumptions were?

Do you think they asked thought-provoking questions? If so, what were those questions?

Would you characterize the Christian's approach as effective in any way? In what way(s)?

What effect, if any, did the experience have on you?

What do you think it would take for you to be persuaded that Christianity is true?

What recommendations would you have, if any, for Christians about communicating their faith?

If each of your experiences were a chapter in a book, what would you title each chapter? What would you title the book?

Is there anything else about your experience(s) that you would like to share?

APPENDIX 7

TRANSCRIPTION APPROVAL EMAIL

[Participant's Name],

I hope you are doing well!

Here is the transcription of the interview from April. If you would like to take a look at it and approve, alter, clarify, and/or offer any additional feedback, please feel free. If you offer anything to the transcription, would you do so in a different font color? Once you're done, you can email it back to me. If I don't hear back from you in 2 weeks, the transcript will be considered approved as is.

I really enjoyed typing out our interview, and again, I appreciate the time you took to hang out with me. I hope your summer is going well!

Lauren

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ABSTRACT

SECULAR STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS
OF CHRISTIAN RHETORIC:
A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

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Generation Z is the most spiritually detached generation in United States history with twice as many self-identified atheists as all other generations combined. These facts mandate a serious examination of how Christians use the classical rhetorical elements revealed in the biblical metanarrative or, more succinctly, Christian rhetoric, to persuade his or her fellow man of the truth and beauty of the gospel.

Although an abundance of literature devoted to the rise of secularism in the United States exists, there is minimal research dedicated to how Generation Z secularists perceive Christian rhetoric. Thus, the purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand how secular, Gen Z, college students have experienced the phenomenon of Christian rhetoric. In an effort to increase understanding of participants' experiences with the phenomenon, open-ended questions were used and results were interpreted to shape Christian rhetorical praxis.

Based on participant perceptions, the study found Christian rhetoricians lacked intellectual vulnerability as well as empathetic imagination and routinely failed to engage in steeped embodied discourse.

Keywords: agnosticism, apologetics, atheism, Christian rhetoric, classical rhetoric, empathetic imagination, ethos, evangelism, Gen Z, Generation Z, intellectual vulnerability, logos, metanarrative, pathos, secular, secularism, steeped embodied discourse, understandings one's audience.

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