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How to Defend Your Faith Without Being a Jerk

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Sometimes it's not what you say, but how you say it.

So there I am, a sophomore in college, half asleep in my 9 a.m. Philosophy 101 class. Half asleep, that is, until the professor's lecture takes a sudden turn from Kant to Christianity.

"Jesus didn't want people to worship him," he informs the class. "Paul introduced that idea much later. Most people don't realize that Paul invented Christianity."

A few moments pass as I chew on the professor's foray into theology. *I'm a Christian. I should say something.* I raise my hand.

"That's an interesting perspective about Paul," I say. "But I have a question. Before Paul accepted Jesus, he traveled from city to city to persecute members of

the early Christian movement. He put Christians in prison. He even had some killed."

"What's your point?" the professor asks, looking a little annoyed.

"How could Paul spend years of his life persecuting members of a religion that he supposedly invented?"

The Real Story

Before I travel any further down memory lane, I have a confession to make. The interaction described above is only half true. Yes, I did take that class. And yes, the professor did trot out the old canard that Paul invented Christianity. The made-up part is my response.

I didn't say it.

I *thought* it. But I didn't say anything. The professor made his remarks and the class went on.

I attended an extremely secular college, with a strong anti-Christian bias. It wasn't unusual for professors to intersperse their lectures with criticisms of Christian beliefs. When I *did* speak up, I found myself punching through paper-thin arguments from professors who were usually just parroting what they'd heard from others. I remember having a private conversation with one of my English professors who regularly took potshots at the Christian faith. "I've never actually read the Bible," she confessed.

Looking back at those days, I wish I had spoken up more often. Not because I have any illusions that I'd win some kind of dramatic in-class showdown or convert my professors. But I wish I had let my fellow students know that there was another side to what they were hearing.

Fortunately, opportunities to speak up about your faith aren't confined to college classrooms. They're everywhere. At the office or work site. With the barista at your favorite coffee shop. At that dinner with coworkers or that Thanksgiving meal with extended family. And don't forget that modern public square we call social media.

But, as I discovered in college, speaking up isn't easy. And the stakes can be much higher than risking a bad grade. Recently a Christian businessman told me

about an uncomfortable meeting he'd just had with his biggest client. Unaware my friend was a Christian, the client launched into a 10-minute diatribe against Christian faith.

In such circumstances, how should we respond? How can we speak up in a way that's respectful but effective? How can we talk about our faith in a way that ultimately leads people one step closer to God? There are plenty of great apologetics resources teaching you *what* to say. Here are a few principles about *how* to say it.

Be Like Ben

As I discovered in college, opportunities to speak about your faith often come when that faith is under attack. In the cases where it's appropriate to say something, a little wisdom from the American Founding Father Benjamin Franklin can help. You're probably wondering what **Ben Franklin** — a man whose faith fell somewhere on the spectrum between deism and biblical Christianity — is doing in this article. Well, Franklin had a brilliant practice for handling dicey discussions. He described it in his autobiography: "**I made it a rule to forbear all direct contradictions to the sentiments of others.**"

In other words, Franklin made a habit of not disagreeing with people right off the bat. He explained, "When another asserted something that I thought an error, I denied myself the pleasure of contradicting him abruptly, and of showing him immediately some absurdity in his proposition." Instead, Franklin "**began by observing that in certain case or circumstances his opinion would be right.**"

Franklin reported that the effect of this simple change in approach was dramatic.

"I soon found the advantage of this change in my manner; the conversations I engaged in went on more pleasantly. The modest way in which I proposed my opinions procured them a readier reception and less contradiction...and I more easily prevailed with others to give up their mistakes and join with me when I happened to be in the right."^[1]

I recall using this strategy when a friend dismissed the idea of heaven as "pie in the sky," saying it makes people passive about their bad circumstances in this life. I resisted the urge to immediately contradict what she said.

Instead I started with affirmation. "I understand what you're saying," I said. "It's true that people use the idea of an afterlife to avoid hard realities in the here and

now. And that kind of escapism can be dangerous. Yet, for me, the idea of heaven actually makes what this life is more important. It means what we do now has implications for eternity."

When someone attacks your beliefs, it's easy to let your emotions flare and to come out swinging. But it's better to be like Ben. Don't lead with a contradiction. Affirm what you can (even if it's just the sentiment behind their statement) and then gently introduce your position. Perhaps you'll find, like Franklin did, that people are more readily persuaded and that the conversation will go "more pleasantly."

Own Your Perspective

In our postmodern era, universal truth claims get a lot of resistance. The philosopher **Jean Lyotard** famously **defined postmodernism** as "**incredulity toward metanarratives**." What does that mean? Basically, that **those big stories** — the **overarching narratives by which we define reality** — **are regarded with suspicion**. **In a postmodern world, no one story is large enough to contain the whole of reality, much less define it for all people.**

But while metanarratives are suspect, personal perspectives are sacrosanct. **You are authorized to tell your story**. It's wise to keep this in mind when you talk about your faith in a public setting. Preface what you say with words like, "I've found that in my experience" or "From a Christian perspective" This doesn't mean you water down the truth. As Christians, we believe in universal truth, but you'll be more likely to gain a hearing if you start by speaking from your personal perspective, rather than trying to claim objectivity.

My wife attended the same college I did. After several frustrating conversations about faith in one class, she started speaking about her beliefs as part of her "culture." She would say things like, "I'm a Christian and in our culture we believe that ..." Suddenly she found that other students were far more open to hearing what she had to say.

Surprise With Joy

My evangelist friend Thomas gave me a surprising bit of advice for sharing my faith with non-Christians. "For goodness' sake, enjoy your faith!" he bellowed in his distinctive Malaysian accent. "Christians get so tense and serious. They forget to show their friends and family that the Christian life is filled with joy."

Religion is a contentious topic these days and the conversations surrounding it are often downright nasty. It's easy to get stuck in a defensive crouch and lose our joy when we tackle the topic. But how can we expect people to want something we don't even appear to enjoy? Yes, go ahead and explain why the Bible is historically reliable. Write that post arguing for the existence of God. But make sure your friends know that [this is more than an academic topic to you](#). It's something that imbues your life with meaning and gives you joy. In the end, that will mean just as much to most people as your careful and persuasive reasoning.

One of the most-cited verses on evangelism comes from [1 Peter 3:15](#): "But in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you." Despite this passage's popularity, we rarely quote the last part of the verse. That's too bad, because it contains an equally important message. We're told that, when we make our defense, to do so "[with gentleness and respect](#)." In the end, presenting the truth in this manner gives it the best chance to be received.

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References

¹ "The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin," Riverside Press, 1886, p. 113.