

Effective Evangelism: JAE363

## TAKING THE OFFENSE WITHOUT BEING OFFENSIVE

by Eric Johnson

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Suppose your favorite NFL team is headed to overtime in a tie game and ends up winning the coin toss. Would you want your team to kick off or receive? It's a no-brainer. Even the most defensive-minded fan wants his team to have the ball. After all, the team receiving the kickoff can win the game by scoring a touchdown in its initial possession. While the defense could cause a turnover, pick up the ball, and run eighty yards for the tie-breaking score, there is a better opportunity to get into the end zone when your team is in control.

When I taught Bible classes at a Christian high school for seventeen years, I believed that getting students to assimilate the information was facilitated when they were actively in the game. For example, instead of merely lecturing on a topic like evil and suffering, I found that it was better to direct the conversation by first asking questions of the students. This allowed me to measure "pre-understanding" and determine their natural position. Questions such as "What is your view on how evil came into existence?" or "Do you believe that evil discounts the possibility that there can be a good God?" were able to give me valuable insights while requiring the students to develop their critical thinking skills by defending a position—if they even had one! Sometimes a "devil's advocate" position was required, so I occasionally used class time to role-play an atheist. Asking, "If God is so good, why did He create evil?" could take an entire class period, especially since the question could be considered "fighting words" to an audience raised since birth in a Christian church! It is true that lectures and laying out the factual information ought to play an important role in teaching, but this sit-and-listen approach should not be the only (or even primary) tool for issues where there is much disagreement.

When it comes to evangelism, desiring to be on offense is a wise choice. If we want to be effective in sharing our faith with other people, why wouldn't we take the ball and be in charge instead of guessing what the opponent will do next? Asking intelligent questions can be an excellent tool in sharing the Christian faith.

**Asking the Right Questions.** This tactic is certainly not new, as the “Socratic Method” —named after the ancient Greek philosopher Socrates—has long been used to stimulate critical thinking skills. In what he calls “the queen mother of all tactics,” apologist Greg Koukl believes that using questions will help the Christian stay “in the driver’s seat in conversations so you can productively direct the discussion, exposing faulty thinking and suggesting more fruitful alternatives along the way.”<sup>1</sup> He explains, “Sometimes the little things have the greatest impact. Using simple leading questions is an almost effortless way to introduce spiritual topics to a conversation without seeming abrupt, rude, or pushy. Questions are engaging and interactive, probing yet amicable. Most important, they keep you in the driver’s seat while someone else does all the work.”<sup>2</sup>

Typically I have found that almost everyone likes to think that their opinion is important. The very idea that you are asking questions—not superficial inquiries but honest questions where you really want to know what the other person is thinking—can help eliminate the pressure many Christians feel, as if they somehow must be the resident experts who possess all the answers to any skeptic’s inquiries. Think about how Jesus used this tactic when He dealt with people. For example, in Matthew 22:41, He set up the situation by asking the Pharisees, “What do you think about the Christ? Whose son is he?” (NIV). Or in John 5:6 when He asked the invalid at the Pool of Bethesda, “Do you want to get well?” (NIV). This question allowed Jesus to understand how badly this man wanted to be healed.<sup>3</sup> Whether you are speaking to a friend, a neighbor, a family member, or even a stranger, thoughtful questions can help guide the conversation and make it more productive than you may have ever thought possible.

Getting an evangelism encounter started can be greatly aided with questions. For example, asking, “Do you know what the gospel of Jesus Christ is?” will tell you how well this person understands Christianity.

Probably one of the most simple but effective introductory questions comes from D. James Kennedy’s *Evangelism Explosion*, which was started in 1962. This tactic begins, “Have you come to a place in your thinking where you would know for sure that if you were to die today, you would go to heaven or is that something you would say you’re still working on?”<sup>4</sup>

A similar tactic is used by evangelist Ray Comfort, who likes to start evangelism encounters by asking, “Would you consider yourself to be a good person?”<sup>5</sup> Such approaches work because many people believe—with no biblical support, of course—that their perceived moral “goodness” makes them worthy for heaven. After all, they reason, there are much worse people out there, like murderers and rapists. When the standard of the law is used as a mirror, the sinner can quickly see that “there is none righteous, no, not one” (Rom. 3:10 KJV).

Imagine an alternative approach, with the Christian walking up to a stranger and pointing a finger in the person’s face, loudly proclaiming, “You are a sinner who is going straight to hell, so you better turn or burn.” While the words might be technically true, they promote accusation over consideration, which can easily result in anger or frustration and hinder what otherwise could have been a successful conversation.

Over the years, certain students in my high school Bible classes were famous for raising their hands and asking questions by which they fully intended to take the discussion off track. They knew that asking questions placed me in a defensive position, effectively giving them control of the discussion. Earlier in my teaching career, I often took the bait, which resulted in having to reschedule the next day's quiz since we didn't cover all the pertinent information. Using tangential questions is a red herring tactic.

Probably the most popular question used on Christians who are sharing the gospel is, "So what will happen to the people in Africa who never heard the gospel?" Is the Christian obligated to answer this when it is obviously used to stall the conversation? I say no. Thus, I often respond in this kind way: "That's a good question, but right now I'm talking to someone who is hearing a presentation of the Christian gospel. How about if I answer that question once we're done with the topic at hand?" The person is usually fine with my response, as I have recognized the legitimacy of the question and am not disqualifying it; all I am doing is delaying the answer. It seems fair to finish the conversation at hand before introducing any new topics. Keeping the topic focused prevents a premature punt.

Another important strategy is making sure you ask questions without sounding like you are accusing the other person. The Christian who comes across as mean-spirited will lose every time. And it's vital for the believer to listen to the answers. If we don't come across as caring, most people who are feeling attacked will dig into their defensive position and not listen to any reasoning, no matter how sound it might be.

A good example of this was illustrated in a recent issue of *Christianity Today*.<sup>6</sup> Rosaria Champagne Butterfield, a university professor of English and women's studies who was once a self-admitted "radical"/"leftist" lesbian, was "tired of students who seemed to believe that 'knowing Jesus' meant knowing little else. Christians in particular were bad readers.... Stupid. Pointless. Menacing. That's what I thought of Christians and their god Jesus."

In 1997, Butterfield wrote a local newspaper article arguing against the Christian men's group Promise Keepers. She received so many letters—both positive and negative—that she ended up putting two empty boxes on her desk to sort the responses. She writes, "But one letter I received defied my filing system. It was from the pastor of the Syracuse Reformed Presbyterian Church. It was a kind and inquiring letter." Pastor Ken Smith encouraged her to consider questions such as: How did you arrive at your interpretations? How do you know that you are right? Do you believe in God?

According to Butterfield, this letter was different from the others who were against her view because the pastor "didn't argue with my article; rather, he asked me to defend the presuppositions that undergirded it." Although she initially threw the letter away, she later took it out of the trash and allowed it to sit on her desk, "confronting me with the world-view divide that demanded a response." Butterfield ended up becoming friends with this pastor and his wife. The positive results did not take place overnight. However, a simple letter that asked legitimate questions ended up

completely rocking the professor's world, causing her eventually to leave her homosexual lifestyle and embrace biblical Christianity.

Will every evangelism encounter that utilizes questions like these always have a happy ending? By no means! However, I have found that it is better to be invited into the backyard of potential believers for a friendly conversation rather than pounding on their doors in a demanding way. What are some ways that you might be able to use this strategy the next time you share your faith?

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## NOTES

- 1 *Tactics: A Game Plan for Discussing Your Christian Convictions* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 24.
- 2 *Ibid.*, 48.
- 3 This is why Bill McKeever and I decided to start each chapter of our book *Answering Mormons' Questions* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2012) with three or four possible "response questions." Clarifying the mindset of a Latter-day Saint is crucial if the Christian hopes to formulate a reasonable answer.
- 4 *Evangelism Explosion*, 4th ed. (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale, 1996).
- 5 *Hell's Best Kept Secret* (New Kensington, PA: Whitaker House, 1989).
- 6 "My Train Wreck Conversion," *Christianity Today*, January/February 2013, 111–12.