

Article: JAL100

## WITNESSING TO THEOLOGICAL LIBERALS: CROSSING THE GREAT EVANGELISM DIVIDE

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The deep cultural divide between theological conservatives and liberals has led to a variety of challenges for anyone who wants to witness to a liberal friend. Rather than first approaching these people with intellectual arguments, we must dispel hostilities and quell misunderstandings about evangelical Christianity. What follows are simple suggestions for jumping over some hurdles while leading a liberal person to faith in Christ.

**Complaint Department Open.** An angry customer received a “crystal” bowl in a Nordstrom box from her tightfisted Aunt Betty. It has a clearly visible seam down one side. She can’t believe how poorly made the bowl is — and from Nordstrom! So she comes to you, the employee at the complaint counter at Nordstrom — the company that sets the standard for retail service excellence. The bowl might not even be a Nordstrom product; yet, what would you say?

- A. “Your Aunt Betty must be really cheap! She didn’t get this *here*. It’s from Junk Mart. Any idiot can see that! Don’t blame us for somebody else’s mistakes. We’d *never* screw up this bad, but those idiots at Junk Mart screw up all the time! Take it to *their* customer complaint department. What are you complaining to me for? I didn’t do it!”
- B. “So? What’s the big deal? Who says we’re perfect? For crying out loud! You hold such high standards! *You* probably couldn’t blow a perfect glass bowl. What makes you think we can? You think that by touting customer excellence and not delivering, we’re being hypocrites? Well, *you* couldn’t do any better! *You’re* a hypocrite for calling *me* a hypocrite, you hypocrite!”
- C. “Oh, I’m so sorry! That must have really disappointed you. We’ll need to see if this type of bowl is in our inventory. If it is, we’ll replace it immediately. If it came from another establishment, and someone inadvertently put it in a Nordstrom’s box to give to you, we’ll help you make arrangements to return it to the appropriate place. While I’m checking on this, here’s a coupon for a free latte in our restaurant. When I have an answer for you, I’ll have you paged.”

When witnessing to liberal people, there are times that we must function as evangelical Christianity’s complaint department. Liberals have often perceived actions of conservative evangelical Christians as harmful to vulnerable groups of people. Because of the strife, division, and misunderstanding that have plagued relations between conservatives and liberals over decades, effective evangelism to liberals often begins on an emotional level rather than on an intellectual one. Let’s take the above scenario and place it in the context of a liberal person complaining to a Christian about a gang of angry, shouting Christians picketing a gay man’s funeral that he or she has just attended. I hope most of us agree that this sort of behavior is outside the bounds of good taste, let alone the bounds of Christian concern and charity. You could respond:

- A. “How can you possibly believe that could be Christian behavior! You’re wrong! Christians don’t do that sort of thing. We don’t hate the sinner. We just hate the sin. That’s Group X’s problem — not my problem. Don’t you stereotype me, Bub!”

- B. "By telling me that you disapprove of that intolerant behavior, you are being intolerant. That makes you not only intolerant, but also a hypocrite yourself."
- C. "I'm so sorry. That must have really frightened and hurt you. It hurts me to hear about that kind of insensitivity, too. Trust me on this: the behavior of the people at your friend's funeral isn't the kind of behavior Jesus expects from His followers. I'm truly sorry it happened. As a Christian, I apologize. Please, tell me more about what that was like for you."

I have heard all of these types of responses when Christians witness to liberal churchgoers. Which one do you think is most likely to lead someone to further investigate a saving relationship with Jesus Christ? Statement A is guaranteed to end your conversation. Statement B might make us feel smugly justified in our beliefs, but it usually does nothing to bridge the divide between the liberal who might face a Christless eternity and the forgiving love of Jesus Christ. Obviously, Statement C will lead to discussion, clarification, and a relationship with you that could lead to an openness to the gospel.

**The Gentle Answer: Proverbs 15:1.** When dealing with liberal people, the evangelical Christian should be prepared to be stereotyped. Many liberals paint evangelicals with a very broad brush (and, I might add, we often do the same to them). They may have learned who we are only through what they've heard on the radio and seen on television (often Christian radio and television!), and they have found it offensive. Rather than launching into apologetics from the start, it's best to ask, "What has been your experience with evangelical Christians?" Not only is this question likely to help your liberal friend let down his or her guard, but it also is likely to give you a revealing picture of how evangelicals are being perceived by liberals.

The next step in talking with your liberal friend is often an apology. John Ortberg, teaching pastor at Willow Creek Community Church, talks about opening doors to people's hearts using the empathetic statement: "I'm so sorry." Like the customer service rep at the Nordstrom counter, we can gain a hearing with our liberal friend by the heartfelt utterance of these three simple words. Even if you didn't cause their pain, an apology from an evangelical opens doors to conversation. The next phrase is just as important — "Tell me more." Not only does this tell your liberal friend that you are interested in him or her, but also it gives you more information about his or her objections to evangelical Christianity.

We are often quite ready to jump in with our beliefs and ideas about God. At best, this leads to a lively discussion about Christianity. At worst, it leads to a degenerating argument about Christianity. Liberals might come away from such a discussion with a bad taste in their mouths. The best way around a degenerating argument is to *ask questions*. Practice the art of "bracketing" — of keeping your own position to yourself while you try to understand where your liberal friend is coming from. If you ask questions well, you are likely to elicit this wonderful response: "What do you think?" At this point, your liberal friend actually cares about your thoughts and doesn't feel forced into listening to your agenda. If that question doesn't come, ask: "Can I share with you my thoughts on this?" Follow your thoughts with a question to your friend: "What kind of sense does that make to you?"

**Do Not Judge: Matthew 7:1–5.** We often assign evil motives to liberals that aren't necessarily true. They do the same to us, of course, but this does not let us off the hook. Many Christians assume, for instance, that gays and feminists are out to destroy faith and family, that people active in the environmental movement are tree-worshipping pantheists, and so forth. We amply demonstrate our own ignorance by touting such attitudes. If we bothered to ask them, we'd often find that we are far from accurate in our assessments of liberal causes. While we might disagree with their ideas and methods, their motivations are not necessarily worse than ours. Indeed, they can sometimes point us to issues concerning which we are either insensitive or unaware.

**Contending for Truth: Galatians 2.** Galatians 2 describes the pain over controversial theological issues that can wrack the body of believers. While we have put the circumcision debate to rest, dozens of other controversies rage within the family of Christ. Many liberals are bewildered by our controversies on old Earth/new Earth, premillennialism/postmillennialism, and a host of other theological issues.

Admit controversy where it exists, and when there are clearly biblically defensible arguments to both sides of an issue, admit that the other side of the controversy might hold some truth. Liberal women, in particular, will have reservations about the “complementarian view” of gender roles. If you are a complementarian, could you admit to her that other people might have well thought out, scripturally based egalitarian understandings of women in the church? A life, an eternity, could hang in the balance. Are we willing to let our own views on admittedly controversial topics take second place to a liberal’s discovering the bedrock — the saving grace of Christ?

**Living at Peace: Romans 12:18.** Imagine a battlefield — smoke, noise, confusion, carnage, and pain. Somebody is going to get hurt, and hurt badly. On one side of the battlefield, every cannonball is painted with a cross or a crown of thorns. The other side is represented by a wild array of imagery — black power fists, women’s equality symbols, the rainbow flag, the ecology flag. Bullets are flying in every direction. Guns of both armies are trained on the enemy.

Now imagine Jesus standing on a hillside saying, “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth!” A cannonball whizzes past Him from the evangelical side. “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God!” A hand grenade from the left flies past Him. Jesus says, “I come that you might have life, and have it abundantly!” and yet another missile shrieks past, destined to detonate on the liberal camp.

In the midst of the carnage, can anybody hear Him? It is easy to be shrill — to make self-righteous declarations. I know. I’ve been shrill myself. It is harder to lay down the guns of self-righteousness at the feet of the Master and listen to what He would have me do. Certainly I’ve been called to defend the faith, but I have a choice. I can defend through diplomacy or through war. It is much more effective to lay down my arms, walk across the battlefield, take the hand of someone far from Christ, and lead that person quietly and humbly to the Prince of Peace.

– *Kate Maver*