

"But I Don't Know All the Answers..."

Helping people meet Jesus is about more than winning a theological debate.

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I have never seen him lose a debate—formal or informal. In fact, Thomas is easily one of the brightest people I have ever met. I remember one of our earliest conversations. As we sipped coffee, our talk gravitated toward the intellectual respectability of atheism. Thomas was then an avowed atheist, and I was a young, eager, intellectually engaged Christian. If the conversation could be characterized as a debate, I lost.

Looking back, however, I don't feel so bad—for a couple of reasons. For one thing, Thomas and I have become close friends. Also, I've learned that winning a theological debate with someone isn't the goal I once thought it was.

When I began those discussions many years ago as a university student, I was all about proclaiming truth to people with the most intellectually sound arguments available. Even though I "won" some of those debates, I didn't win many hearts. People walked away muttering, "Whatever you say!" They were turned off by my heavy-handed approach.

Fruitful dialog involves much more than right answers or superior arguments for the gospel's veracity, a lesson I'd only just begun to learn in my college days. Since then, God has helped me see the necessity of two other crucial components in my spiritual conversations with nonbelievers: following the Holy Spirit's lead and responding to others with truth *and* grace. I've learned the hard way that when I speak the truth without yielding to God's leading or practicing grace, I may do more harm than good.

The Bible Answer Man?

One of the verses I memorized and thought about often as I worked on my philosophy degrees was 1 Pet. 3:15: "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have."

For years, I labored under the false impression that being "prepared to give an answer" obligated me to address every question or objection a person might offer against Christianity. If I couldn't articulate a compelling response to Christianity's toughest conundrums, I felt I was letting people down (or even worse, letting God down).

Eventually, God taught me that I had twisted the principle in this passage into something much too broad. The result was a distorted and unrealistic expectation about answering questions. What Peter is actually saying is that we are "to give an answer" for *why we have hope in Christ*. He is *not* saying we have to be certain we have the upper hand intellectually before we enter into spiritual conversations.

As followers of Christ, we have a responsibility to think carefully about the hard questions of our faith. But if we believe it's our job to answer every possible question about Christianity, we'll likely commit one of two errors: We'll avoid God-ordained opportunities for evangelism, or we'll depend arrogantly on our perceived mastery of a certain topic instead of relying on the Holy Spirit. Let's look at both of these errors.

Avoidance. When I think I must have all the answers, I may avoid situations that feel uncomfortable or difficult, even though God is calling me into those conversations and inviting me to shine His light. When I first began my college studies, I suffered from this "intimidation factor." I could be easily paralyzed when I met people I deemed smarter than me. Because I feared they might ask questions I couldn't answer, I avoided talking about spiritual things.

This tendency grew more pronounced after my first discussion with Thomas. Over the months that followed, we got to know each other better in our classes. When the topic of God inevitably resurfaced, I was tentative, evasive, and vague—anxious to avoid a rematch in which I would again fail to answer his questions adequately. Sometimes I even tried to turn the conversation away from God. I hated feeling stupid. I hated the thought of not having the answers.

In His gentle yet firm way, God convicted me of a much deeper problem: What I actually hated was looking bad. He showed me that I needed to reengage with Thomas and to *share my real life*, not some carefully screened representation of it. I needed to desire to honor God and love Thomas more than I wanted to protect myself or my reputation. If I didn't know the "right" answer, I needed to say so.

By God's grace, I began to confront my fear of looking bad and share the gospel more frequently. Unfortunately, avoidance wasn't the only problem I faced when it came to evangelism.

Arrogance. After I had studied philosophy (and apologetics) for a while, I quit avoiding "smart" people. In fact, I started looking for them, eager to talk about Jesus with anyone willing to go toe-to-toe with my sharpened rhetorical skills. Yet the self-centered nature of my sin hadn't changed; it had merely put on a different mask. I was still relying on my own abilities. Instead of shrinking back in fear, I was pressing forward in my own strength. In some ways this was worse, because it looked more spiritual.

Even though I was "witnessing" to many people and answering their questions, I failed to rely on the Holy Spirit's ability to guide those conversations and to help me identify the real issues people were dealing with. If I had been more sensitive to the Holy Spirit, I believe that season would have been more fruitful.

Following the Spirit's Lead

Paul describes the importance of relying on the Spirit's leadership in 1 Cor. 2:1–5:

When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling. My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power.

When Paul ministered to the Corinthians, he could have pulled out sophisticated theology (as he did in his letter to the Romans) or astute cultural and philosophical observations (as he did for the Athenians), but he didn't. Paul "did not come with eloquence or superior [human] wisdom." Instead, he came "with a demonstration of the Spirit's power"—the redemptive power of God at work through him.

In other words, Paul's ministry to the Corinthians flowed out of his relationship with God and his acute awareness of what God had done and was continuing to do in him because of the cross. Paul chose to relate to the Corinthians on the basis of his relationship with God as directed by the Holy Spirit. He didn't try to manipulate them into anything; he let the Spirit and the Spirit's work in his life do the convincing.

I am also learning to follow the Spirit's lead. When I am sensitive to the Spirit, I know when to speak and when to listen; I know when to offer well-reasoned arguments and when to respond from my heart and experiences with God. Either way, it's the Spirit's prompting that drives the agenda, not mine. Though God does use our training, our talents, and our expertise as we speak to nonbelievers about the kingdom of God, He doesn't want us to *depend* on these things as if they are what matter most. The Spirit will show us when and how to speak truth into someone's life.

Thomas and I have had numerous intellectual conversations about God. We have talked about why God might allow evil in the world, whether the arguments for God's existence are compelling, and whether it is fair for God to expect everyone to accept Jesus to receive eternal life. Sometimes, my arguments made sense to him. Other times, I've been unable to respond to his objections in a way that challenged his beliefs—or in a way that satisfied my need to give the right answer.

But even when Thomas has remained skeptical of my beliefs, I've learned to follow the Spirit as He leads me to describe for Thomas the ways I've experienced Christ in my life—not as a detached intellectual concept, but as a person with whom I have a relationship.

One such conversation happened during our second year together at the University of California, Irvine. We were studying for an exam on Plato and discussing what scholars call the Euthyphro dilemma—a problem that Socrates posed for anyone who believed in God and objective moral standards. Thomas found Socrates' dilemma convincing; he thought it proved belief in God was logically incoherent.

I didn't have an answer for Thomas. As we talked, however, I realized it didn't matter whether I won this argument. In that moment, the Spirit encouraged me to tell my friend how walking with God helped me think about morality. I talked about why God's standards of right and wrong were not mere philosophical abstractions but truths written on my heart. I shared how my motivation for doing things I knew were right and true flowed from my love of God and my confidence that He had my best interests in mind. I could rest in the belief that I would ultimately find my fulfillment by following God's ways.

I didn't win an argument with Thomas that day. I did, however, give him a picture of God and my relationship with Him—a picture Thomas had never seen before. It was a picture that included not only God's truth, but also revealed His grace.

Grace and Rapport

One verse that has helped me think about how to integrate grace into my truth telling is Col. 4:6: "Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone."

Paul exhorts us to engage in grace-filled conversations *so that* we will be in a position to answer people's questions. This attitude creates an environment of rapport—of mutual understanding, trust, and the willingness to go deeper relationally.

Rapport is crucial in building relationships with non-Christians. It enables people to listen to us, to hear our questions, and to hear our answers. We simply can't answer people's questions if they are unwilling to listen. Yet as I engage in grace-filled, seasoned conversations, people are willing to consider what I have to say.

Jesus was a genius at establishing rapport. His interaction with the Samaritan woman in John 4 is a great example. Beginning with His request for a drink of water, Jesus was able to touch her soul. The conversation moves from well water to spiritual thirst to her relational despair (evidenced by her many husbands). In the middle of this, Jesus speaks the life-giving truth that "whoever drinks the water I give...will never thirst" (v. 13). Jesus demonstrated compassion in listening to an outcast woman and in offering her the water of eternal life.

Our compassion can also create rapport. We demonstrate compassion and sincere interest in others' lives when we help them move or work on their car, when we help them with their children or their yard, when we're willing to listen to their questions about something in their lives they don't understand. Grace opens the door for us to shed the light of truth into our friends' hearts in these moments. Their ears are tuned to what we have to say.

In my relationship with Thomas over the years, perhaps my greatest testimony to him was not what I said but the way we spent time together. We did more than take philosophy classes together. I taught him how to fish, and he tried to teach me how to surf. I loved being around Thomas, and he could sense it. Gradually, he opened up and told me his deeper thoughts.

Thomas and I had known each other for a couple of years when a crisis erupted in his life. We were ready to hit the beach one day when he told me his girlfriend, Elizabeth, was pregnant. Even though they had been together for three years and he wanted to marry her, he hadn't yet asked. Now she was pregnant, and they were considering an abortion.

After his initial disclosure, he hesitated. Then he said, "If I help her get an abortion, I feel like I'll be turning my back on God. How could God accept me after that?" I was blown away. Despite all of our spirited conversations about whether it was rational to believe in God, in the deepest part of his heart Thomas really did take God seriously.

We never made it into the ocean that day. Instead we had the most amazing conversation about God and His grace, about God's unrelenting love for Thomas, and about how God had moved heaven and earth to invite Thomas into

an intimate relationship with Him. A few months later, Thomas and Elizabeth married. A few months after that, they celebrated the arrival of their baby boy.

That talk on the beach was a turning point in our relationship and in our conversations about God. Thomas and I started to read the Scriptures together. He has become quite vocal about his belief in God—even defending God’s existence among some of our other skeptical friends.

Thomas has not yet chosen to embrace Christ. Yet I remain confident that God will continue to use truth, grace, and the power of the Holy Spirit to draw my friend into relationship with Him.

On Your Own:

In Dependence and Compassion

1. Mark Case describes how he was initially stymied in evangelism because he thought he had to have all the answers. Later, he faced the opposite problem: overconfidence in his ability to proclaim the gospel. Which of these two problems related to evangelism did you most associate with, and why?
2. Whether we’re fearful or overconfident, the antidote is the same: reliance on the Spirit’s leadership. What do you think it might look like to entrust the problem you described in the first question to the Holy Spirit? (For example, you might confess that you often rely on your apologetic skills instead of praying for God’s help in conversations with unbelievers.) Ask God to give you one concrete way to express your dependence on the Holy Spirit in evangelism. Record your impressions here.
3. Mark’s relationship with Thomas moved beyond intellectual sparring to a friendship marked by compassion and service. Think about your non-Christian friends for a moment. Which of these friends faces a significant need or problem right now?
4. How might you meet your friend’s need or offer support in a practical way?
5. Often when a friend is struggling, we are tempted to unload our wisdom in an attempt to solve the problem. Sometimes, however, what’s needed most is a listening ear. Let your non-Christian friend know that you’re available to listen if he or she wants to talk about what’s going on.