

HOW TO HANDLE CRITICISM OF YOUR FAITH

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It's almost inevitable. The more vocal you are about your faith, the more likely you are to find people who are opposed to it. But how you choose to react when people take jabs at Christianity is profoundly important. Your response can set the tone for meaningful conversation and increase your influence, or it can close the door to dialogue about faith. Here are some suggestions for responding when someone criticizes your faith:

DON'T GET DEFENSIVE

You're at a family gathering and the topic of religion comes up. Your new brother-in-law says, "I'm sorry. I just think that faith is nonsense, and religious people are delusional." The room goes silent, and everyone turns to you as the "religious" person in the room. What do you do? The immediate reaction is to feel defensive. After all, he's calling you delusional, right? Instantly, you feel a rush of adrenaline made up of offense and embarrassment. If you succumb to those feelings, your response is probably going to be emotional. You run the risk of coming off sharp and angry or hurt and overwhelmed.

No matter how you feel, don't let this moment be about you, and don't get short-sighted. You won't win them by engaging in an argument. Work on understanding their perspective. Respectfully ask probing questions. This will help you have a conversation that doesn't become contentious. Find Common Ground. When the apostle Paul was waiting for his comrades in Athens, he was overcome by the idolatry there. He ended up in the marketplace debating the Stoic and Epicurean philosophers. He began addressing the crowd by appealing to their sense of devotion:

"People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: to an unknown god. So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship, and this is what I am going to proclaim to you" (Acts 17:22–23). He trapped them in their own logic. Their city featured many objects of worship, and even included an altar to honour any god that they may have missed. Paul basically said, "If you're serious about what you don't know, then you have to listen. I just might have something to share that you need to know."

He finishes his speech by quoting the Greek poet, Aratus: "God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us. 'For in him we live and move and have our being.' As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring'" (Acts 17:27–28). These Greeks likely don't know a lot about the God of the Jews, and they probably haven't heard about Jesus. But they are sincere, and Paul begins his address by complimenting that openness. In closing, Paul quotes a poem that's actually an invocation of Zeus.

But despite the fact that Paul doesn't worship Greek gods, he agrees with this particular phrase about having our being in God. And on that common ground, he's able to build meaningful dialogue. The key takeaway here is that if we listen, we can find places where we can agree or affirm a detractor's point of view. If someone criticizes something in the church that seems accurate, acknowledge it.

From there, you can talk about the tension felt between Jesus and the religious establishment in His day. This allows you to direct the conversation to the Lord, but in a way that makes the other person feel heard. By not getting defensive and finding common ground, you create more opportunities to talk about what matters.

KEEP THE MAIN THING THE MAIN THING

A conversation about faith can go in a lot of directions, many of which are dead ends. You need to remember that the gospel is ultimately about Jesus, and you can't allow yourself to get pulled too far away from that centre. Don't feel like it's your job to answer every accusation or respond to every question. As Peter says, we're to: "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behaviour in Christ may be ashamed of their slander" (1 Peter 3:15–16).

You're not called to have an explanation for every uncertainty or allegation. But you must be prepared to explain your hope in Jesus Christ. This means clearly communicating: Who He is, Why He died, Why He was raised and Why He's returning. And most importantly, what He means to you! Paul tells us that "The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel that displays the glory of Christ, who is the image of God" (2 Corinthians 4:4). By bringing the conversation back to Jesus, there's an opportunity for the blinders to be removed and the truth of God to be revealed in the beauty of Jesus.

And isn't that what sharing your faith is all about? Like Paul says in 1 Corinthians 3:6-7, we have the opportunity to plant a seed of the gospel in someone's life, or water a seed, but God is in charge of making the seed of interest grow. You can rest in knowing that the results of one's heart towards the gospel, are in God's hands, not yours.