

How to Share the Gospel With an Atheist

Last week I sat next to James on a flight from St. Louis to Denver. As we talked, the subject turned to spirituality and religion.

I confessed that I was a preacher, and he confessed he was an atheist. What unfolded on the rest of the flight was a deep, thought-provocative, laughter-laced gospel conversation.

Over the years, I've had the privilege of engaging many atheists like James in various settings. I've discovered five helpful tips when sharing the gospel with someone who claims to not believe in God.

1. *Don't* be shocked, and *do* ask tons of questions. Some atheists like to shock Christians with the fact that they don't believe in God. This brand of atheist pulls the pin on the "There is no God" grenade and drops it in the middle of the conversation, expecting Christians to run for cover.

Don't be phased. As a matter of fact, start asking questions about their atheism. Find out what they mean by atheism (some are agnostics but call themselves atheists). Ask questions about their background. Were they raised in church? Do they have any Christian friends? Where were they educated about atheism?

And remember that, as you ask questions, your goal is not to trap them but to understand them. Find out areas where you agree. Just like Paul found common ground with the Athenians when he discovered an altar to the "Unknown God," we can find common ground in a mutual rejection of legalistic religion, a passion for science and reason and, usually, an overall positive view of the historic Jesus.

Although James spoke somewhat negatively of religion, he spoke well of Jesus. While he didn't view Jesus as the Son of God, he did perceive him as an enlightened soul. At the minimum, that was something I could build on in making my own case for Christ.

2. Listen deeply for the real “why.” Often atheists have a reason (other than “reason”) for becoming atheists. Listen for it. Sometimes it's anger over losing a loved one. Other times it's that they were hurt by the church in some way. But often there's a “why” behind the lie they are embracing.

In John 4, Jesus masterfully attacked the why behind the lie the woman at the well was embracing. She was not an atheist but a hedonist who thought that satisfaction could be found if she finally found the right guy. But Jesus offers her living water to satisfy her deepest needs and, finally, her thirst was fully quenched.

James shared with me about his upbringing in England and his regular attendance at the Church of England. He told me about how his wife had left him and how he could only see his kids every other weekend. James shared how he reads at least a book a week and how he loses himself in novels.

As he shared, I couldn't quite nail down why he was an atheist, but I could sense that he was a lonely man. My heart went out to him, and I think he could sense my sympathy.

3. Connect relationally. Atheists are real people with real feelings. They laugh, cry, talk and connect like anyone else. I think that too many times, Christians treat atheists as objects and not people.

James and I joked together as we sparred each other. I listened to him, and he listened to me. Bottom line is that I like James. He is an interesting guy with an interesting story.

We should heed Paul's reminder to Timothy about how to deal with those who disagree with us theologically:

"Don't have anything to do with foolish and stupid arguments, because you know they produce quarrels. And the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful. Opponents must be gently instructed, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth, and that they will come to their senses and escape from the trap of the devil, who has taken them captive to do his will" (2 Tim. 2:23-26, NIV).

4. Assume that, down deep inside, they do believe in God. I don't think I've ever met anyone who genuinely rejects the existence of God. Sure, I've met many who have claimed God's existence to be a lie, but I'm convinced that, down deep inside, they really do believe there's a God.

Why do I believe that? Because Scripture makes it clear in Romans 1:18-21 that there are no real atheists:

"The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people, who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened."

They may try to suppress their belief in God, but sooner or later in the discussion, atheists say something like, "Well, if God is so good, then why does He allow ... ?" This is the point in the conversation where they have "forgotten" their atheism and revealed some of their challenges with not the reality of God but the nature of God.

When you assume that an atheist does really believe in the existence of God, it gives you the freedom not to have to prove God's existence but to share God's story. You can be sure that, down deep inside, the gospel is churning in the soul of the atheist.

5. Frame the gospel as a love story (that just happens to be true). When I shared the gospel with James, I wasn't trying to prove God's existence. I was simply sharing the story of God's love. I said something like, "James, at the core of Christianity is a love story. Jesus put it this way: 'For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him will not perish but has everlasting life.'"

I could tell James was intrigued by this view. He listened respectfully and asked thoughtful questions.

Yes, I dipped into some apologetics at this point (C.S. Lewis' Lord, lunatic or liar argument, teleological argument, etc.), but only after I had framed the gospel as a love story. In the words of my friend Bill Jack, too many times too many Christians use apologetics as a sledgehammer instead of a crowbar to pry open closed minds. As a result, the conversation turns argumentative instead of respectful.

James and I had a respectful conversation where I heard him and he heard the Good News of Jesus. My job is not to lead him to Jesus but to "set forth the truth plainly" and let the Spirit of God take it from there.

James didn't say the sinner's prayer when the plane pulled up to the gate after landing. But I believe that somewhere between Denver and St. Louis, the Spirit of God nudged him closer to Jesus. It is my prayer that, in God's perfect time, he will cross the line of faith and receive Jesus as his Savior.

Let's love the atheists we encounter as we humbly and gently

introduce them to the God who loves them even more.

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