

How You Present the Gospel Matters

How we present the gospel may open or close the door to further discussion.

The Bible instructs us to have conversation “seasoned with salt” and to be prepared to speak up for the gospel “in season and out of season” (see Col. 4:6, 2 Tim. 4:2). Christians at times fall into the pattern of imposing the gospel message indiscriminately and gracelessly in all social settings. At other times they are tongue-tied and embarrassed by the challenge of speaking out about “the hope that is within” them when speaking with nonbelievers.

The antidote to the second problem is to get on fire with the Holy Spirit. It then becomes very hard not to tell other people about Jesus.

The antidote for the first is more subtle. It requires us to respect others and take them seriously. Absolutely nobody wants to feel he is merely a statistic, someone who has to be “reached” with the gospel, no matter how crudely or boorishly. If a person does not feel respected, nothing on earth will induce him to listen to an explanation of what Christianity is.

There is a way of answering objections to Christian belief that opens rather than closes the door to further discussion. That way might be called “the way of graciousness.” I saw a magnificent example of that graciousness recently.

At a dinner in my home, I invited two Christian couples and one agnostic and his wife, who has recently reaffirmed her commitment to the Jewish tradition. The two Christian couples both were very mature believers who had read and even written (one was a well-known author) widely about the faith.

As I hovered over the dinner, trying to ensure everything went smoothly (my wife had cooked exceptionally well), I had little chance to participate in the conversation. But I overheard much. What struck me was the exceptional graciousness of our Christian guests in responding to the objections to Christianity voiced by the agnostic and his wife.

Everything seemed to fall into the conversational mix: U.S. policy in Iraq, The Passion of the Christ, Christianity and Islam, the faith of President Bush. Not surprisingly, the criticism of Bush, of the United States' Iraq policy and of Mel Gibson came fast and furiously from our skeptical guests. But I was struck by the fact that, instead of refuting the two critics head-on, the Christians skillfully deflected the attacks both with references to pertinent facts that modified the criticisms and with patient attention to all the points brought up.

No one ever said, "You're wrong in saying that!" or impugned the motives of the critics. Above all, what was conveyed was respect for the opinions of our dinner guests and a sense of the pleasure of their company. At the end of the evening the Jewish wife wrote in our guest book that the conversation had been "wonderful!" Her husband was equally effusive.

Were either of these skeptics persuaded by the arguments they heard? Probably not. Were they more disposed on leaving our house to hear more from a contrary (i.e., Christian) point of view? Almost certainly. Each felt honored and esteemed by the other guests in a way that is often quite rare during a conversation in which there is ardent disagreement.

There is surely a lesson here as we Christians attempt, sometimes daily, to engage the culture. It is certain that our manner of presenting the gospel can be even more important than the content of our presentation.

Most of us have heard strident criticism from nonbelievers of

some of the programs on Christian television. Without embarrassing any particular Christian broadcaster, can we not admit that some of that criticism is legitimate?

Professions of faith, or even personal testimonies, that are loud and tasteless probably alienate more viewers than they attract to Christianity. And we all probably have been witnesses in person of presentations of the gospel that were arrogantly expressed or needlessly aggressive.

It is often said of actors or speakers that they should leave the stage with their audiences wanting to hear more from them. The same is true of a Christian testimony. Does it incline people to turn away from faith or to want to learn more about it? Our skeptical guests the other night certainly left our home wanting to hear more.

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