

## **Sharing the Faith with Agnostics**

*by Rev. Joe Cox*

[The Diag](#) forms the heart and soul of social life at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. Diagonal paths from all across the main campus converge on this simple brass M that marks the central meeting place of campus. Sunbathers, Frisbee golfers, picnickers, pontiffs and even Hash-bashers congregate at this place that represents the quintessence of academic and libertarian freedom. Had Plato lived long enough, even he might've been found corrupting the youth of Michigan on the steps of the Harlan Hatcher Graduate Library that marks the south end of the area. Walking through the Diag on any given day, one is almost sure to encounter street preachers, political activists and even a TA winning points with his class by teaching outside.

One is reminded of the time in which St. Paul encountered the philosophers of his day in the city of Athens ([Acts 17:16-34](#)). He had begun in his usual way of first testifying to the risen Christ with the Jews and God-fearing Greeks in the Synagogue; he then turned his attention to those in the marketplace where he won the interest of some philosophers who brought him back to the Areopagus—Athens own “Diag.” It was there he addressed the Agnostics of his day. He neither railed against them, nor insulted them. Rather he respected their devotion to the divine. Stoics and Epicureans acknowledged the existence of god in the philosophical sense, though in general they would not allow themselves to be bound by the religious stories of the “pagans” who feared falling under the wrathful eyes of the Greek or Roman pantheons. Paul did well to remember that they were not atheists, who don't believe in the existence of God. These were agnostics—those whose own devotion led to the humble (or perhaps surreptitiously prideful) conclusion that they simply didn't know enough about God. It is not his existence that is in doubt—but rather his self-revelation.

Standing at the foot of the steps of the “Grad” library, my friend pointed toward a rather odd t-shirt walking toward us, almost too big for its owner. The black color of the shirt merely intensified the emblazed white text: “God Hates Me”. It was a gloomy day and the shirt's owner shuffled past us with his head down. I could not get past the shirt. How could anyone think that God, who loved the whole world enough to send His only-begotten son to die for humanity, would hate him? Impelled by a nearly irresistible urge that God had placed me at that spot for just this time, I nervously approached the fellow student and asked that very question.

Like the altar “TO AN UNKOWN GOD” this religious icon did not deny God's existence, but it did belie the worshipper's ignorance of God's true nature; ignorance in the good sense: he lacked the knowledge. Starting with the creation, Paul began to reveal the true nature of God to the Athenian agnostics. He spoke of creation and Adam and God's ongoing relationship with men and finally he arrived at the true revelation of God's nature.

Like the Stoics and Epicureans, my God-hating-t-shirt wearing friend was more than willing to have a prolonged conversation—one that did span the course of scripture confronting issues such as the parting of the Red Sea. But at the heart of all the questions and challenges to the proclamation of the Christian faith was a resounding agnosticism—“if God loves me so much, then why has He never made himself known to me?” It was humbling to look that man in the eyes, realizing God's purpose

"Therefore since we are God's offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone—an image made by man's design and skill. In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead" (Acts. 17:30-31).

for me that day, and respond. "My friend, He did. Who do you think sent me to talk to you? Jesus really does love you."

In the end it wasn't about having all the right scientific answers to the Intelligent Design debate, being able to explain the miracles of the Bible, or even being able to justify why his life had been so wrought with disaster. It was simply that he lacked the knowledge; ignorance in the biblical sense: he didn't know God. He had no relationship with the Creator and Redeemer of life. If I ever saw that

man again on that campus of 40,000 students I didn't recognize him. I don't know how God used those moments in the shadow of the Diag to create faith in the heart of one who desperately needed His love. I do know that I never saw that shirt on campus again; perhaps that absence is itself an unknown altar to God.

## Tips:

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**Listen:** Perhaps one of the biggest detriments to sharing the Gospel is... sharing the Gospel. If that statement just made you spray your milk all over your computer screen, at least I know you're paying attention. [St. Francis of Assisi](#) is often credited with the saying, "Preach the Gospel at all times; when necessary use words." Frankly such a recommendation seems foolish, as language is the very means in which God has ensconced the Gospel. Sharing the Good News of Jesus cannot be done apart from using words to make known the Christ, who is the Word of God (John 1:1, 14)! The detriment to sharing the word of God is not in the word: "It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I have sent it" (Isaiah 55:11). However sharing God's word is often a judicious matter of first observing and listening to the hearer so that God's word may be appropriately applied.

Remember how Paul zeroed in on the philosophers' acknowledgement of God's existence? He allowed their reference points to frame the discussion in which he made the Christ known to them. Take time to listen to your agnostic friend. If he or she is unconcerned with whether or not the dinosaurs walked the earth alongside men, don't bring it up. Listen not only for intellectual objections, but rather listen past the intellectual objections for the relationship needs which are wrapped inside those objections. Speak to both the professed and hidden concerns.

Ask if you're hearing those needs correctly. Respect the person enough to understand where they are coming from and then share both Law and Gospel appropriately to their particular situation. Remember that at the heart of agnosticism is a matter of "not-knowing." After all, the simple translation of agnostic is "without knowledge." How will you gain the knowledge necessary to communicate meaningfully without first listening?

[C.F.W. Walther](#) points to this understanding of the hearer when he writes, "Preach so that every hearer feels: 'He means me. He has painted the hypocrite exactly as I am.' Again, the pastor may have described a person afflicted with temptation so plainly that the actual victim of a temptation has to admit: 'That is my condition.' The penitent person must soon feel while listening to the pastor: 'That comfort is meant for me; I am to appropriate it.' The alarmed soul must be led to think: 'Oh, that is a sweet message; that is for me!' Yea, the impenitent, too, must be made to acknowledge: 'The preacher has painted my exact portrait.'" (Walther, 53)

**Ask Questions:** Sincere listening will beget questions: questions for clarification; questions for follow-up; questions of interest. Questions are powerful when sharing the faith for three reasons:

- 1) Questions communicate relationship and interest in the individual. Practice this the next time you are in a social gathering. Focus on allowing questions to drive dialogue with another person. Ask specific questions about their job, family etc. Most people like to talk about themselves. We feel genuinely connected to another who takes an interest in our lives. We develop trust in that individual and are more open to hear what she says when it is our turn to listen.
- 2) Questions clarify the condition of the soul of the agnostic. By asking probing questions, we can dig deeper into what concerns, hopes and fears drive a person. A person will not “spill their guts” if we come up and ask, “What drives your adherence to agnosticism?” But if we listen for clues to their life experiences, we can piece together a better understanding of who this person is and what aspects of the Gospel story they are most in need of hearing emphasized.
- 3) Questions can be used to challenge preconceived or ill-reasoned arguments. Rather than attacking a person’s worldview, ask them to back it up. Ask the hard questions from a genuine desire to see things from their perspective. If you note an inconsistency in their answer, politely ask about it, “Earlier you said X; I’m not sure how that coincides with Y. Can you show me how you reconcile those two statements? Many times a person merely hasn’t given enough thought to properly shape a strongly held conviction and asking questions can cause them to reconsider their positions and become open to other options. In a radio interview ([“The Art of Christian Debate”](#)) with Rev. Todd Wilken of [Issues Etc.](#), Greg Koukl of [Stand to Reason](#) offers 3 key questions to guide an evangelistic conversation: 1) What do you mean by that? 2) How did you come to that conclusion? 3) Have you ever considered...?

- **Build a Relationship:** At the heart of agnosticism is a lack of relationship between the individual and God. Even today we speak of “knowing someone... in the biblical sense.” For the Bible-writers, knowledge was much more than mere intellectual assent. Knowledge was about having a relationship on an appropriate level. Thus Jeremiah predicts the coming of the Messiah saying, “No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest,” declares the LORD. “For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more” (Jer. 31:34). It’s not just enough to know the name of the Lord intellectually. Instead knowledge of the Lord is a relationship—the true remedy to “not knowing.” Likewise it is necessary for the Christian evangelist to embody the relationship that the Lord desires with the agnostic. In spite of the story recounted above, I am not a big proponent of what is often called “contact evangelism” where the Christian engages someone merely for the purpose of converting him. Instead I have found that the most effective evangelism refrains from treating someone as an object—a number to notch on the proselytizing belt. Relational evangelism will seek to build a relationship with the person, rather than reducing that person to the mere role of “sinner.” When I care about the person as a person, through our friendship I am able to share a relationship with Christ that is more than a prescribed cliché. Very few relationships on earth are entirely of a “spiritual” nature. In fact genuine relationships can be observed in the blandest discussions about a favorite soft drink or about how one’s day went. I eat and drink and laugh and cry with a person through

“Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.”  
(1 Corinthians 12:27)

his life and in that God manifests himself to my friend *through relationship* with His body on earth.

- **Tell the Story:** Just to the left of my computer screen is a yellow sticky note on which is written a quote from Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon's *Resident Aliens*: "Story is the fundamental means of talking about and listening to God, the only human means available to us that is complex and engaging enough to make comprehensible what it means to be with God" (54-55). Stories assume relationship. Through stories we relate to characters. My grandfather used to delight in telling stories about his early life. I came to know, actually relate, to my grandfather more in those stories of a boy in St. Mary's Orphanage and Industrial School for Boys and of a young soldier in the Second World War than perhaps I did through any dogmatic statement he ever made. (He probably did make them but I don't remember any; his stories still flood my mind though.) The story of God's relationship with the world through Jesus Christ is simply the most exciting story that could ever occur—the plot is so intricate that it took thousands of years to get to the climax and even now rushes toward its eschatological conclusion, sweeping us up in its torrent as we become characters within the great drama of mankind's encounter with God. Stories break down boundaries. They seem safe because they are distant and the truth they claim, especially the truth of the biblical story, seems too far removed to be a threat to one's unbelief. That is exactly what makes a story (and especially the biblical story) so threatening: when defenses are lowered a relationship emerges that can have eternal ramifications. It is characteristic of spiritually oriented post-moderns to be agnostic. There is not a cultural disavowal of God so much as an uncertainty. Stories break through that uncertainty—when the miraculous and the powerful and loving can happen to the characters with whom we relate, we can hope they will certainly happen to us as well!

## Resources:

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- **"The Art of Christian Debate"** by Greg Koukl. Issues Etc. Feb. 1, 2004. In this two-part series, Koukl is interviewed by Todd Wilken of Issues Etc. The interview presents an easy way of steering conversations with unbelievers through the guiding questions mentioned above. This radio interview is available via mp3 and windows media formats at the Issues Etc. website: [http://kfu.org/ie\\_archive\\_feb04.htm](http://kfu.org/ie_archive_feb04.htm)
- ***The Case for Christ*** by Lee Strobel. Zondervan Publishing House. Grand Rapids, MI. 1998. This rapid-paced book traces the spiritual journey of an atheist reporter who interviewed leading theologians regarding the authenticity and validity Jesus Christ's claims. This journey actually led to Strobel's conversion as God's word transformed him and paved the way to this first in a series of books devoted to honestly answers objections against the Christian faith.
- ***The Christian Apologetics and Research Ministry***. <http://www.carm.org/> This website offers a comprehensive resource for both answering common objections to Christianity as well as training to be an apologist (one who offers a defense for the Christian faith). This is a quick reference guide for either designing evangelism and/or apologetic courses or to locate a solid answer for a seeker's question.

- ***The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel*** by Dr. C.F.W. Walther. (W.H.T. Dau, trans.) Concordia Publishing House. St. Louis, MO. 1986. After more than 120 years from their first presentation, this collection of the original Missouri Synod president's evening lectures still stands as the foremost work guiding a preacher's use of law and Gospel in proclaiming Jesus Christ.
- ***Resident Aliens*** by Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon. Abingdon Press. Nashville, TN. 1989. This resource portrays Christianity as colony of pilgrims standing against a world that has lost its grip on values and looks at how this colony is not ready to be written off from the spiritual contributions it has left to offer in the name of Jesus Christ.
- **"Six Enemies of Apologetic Engagement"** by Douglas Groothuis. <http://www.leaderu.com/common/sixenemies.html> In this article, Groothuis argues against various apologetic approaches, which have hindered the modern Christian evangelist. His discussion is both enlightening and empowering for the Christian seeking to present credible answers to the questioning unbeliever.

## Practice:

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- **Bible Class Engagement:** This is an effective training exercise that can be grafted into a Bible study or some other presentation on developing evangelism skills. In this exercise two people are paired up to practice dialoguing. One person is to play the "agnostic" and another is to play the "evangelist". Predetermine what overarching question is driving the agnostic's skepticism. It is up to the evangelist to uncover the root of this skepticism and proclaim the Gospel to it in a way that is relational, indicative of Christ's presence in the conversation and honors the concerns of the agnostic. At the end of the exercise have the agnostic evaluate the evangelist on how well she respected the agnostic's position, uncovered the underlying issue and appropriately proclaimed Law and Gospel to that situation. Have the partners exchange the roles and work the exercise with a new "overarching question."
- **Engage an online agnostic.** The best way to practice actually sharing Christ with an agnostic person whose worldview is different from your own is to actually do it. Evangelism on any level is often intimidating for Christians. There are fears of rejection, failure and incompetence, which need to be challenged. If you are like most people, these fears are usually heightened when sharing Christ with someone you know. So here's how you practice in a way that helps eliminate the emotional baggage of fear: Visit an on-line chat or interactive blog that is specifically set up for religious discussions: just Google "religious chat" and away you go. Be up front though—the goal is to build relationships, yes; even electronically—if you find yourself in an exclusive dialogue with someone about religion, be up front about your goals. Say, "Hey, I've always been intimidated about sharing my faith with others and so I'd like to dialogue with you (ask you some questions) on this topic. Do you mind?" There are some unfriendly folks out there—but you'd be surprised how many people are willing to share on the Internet when you're honest about your intentions. Remember to focus on what the other person is saying and respond with questions. Even when you share the story of Jesus, you can preface with a question: "What do you think of about Jesus dying on the cross?" Respond to their answer, "Why do you think that?" Remember to actually listen!!! Oh, and be polite!

## Conclusion:

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Agnosticism may be a form of antagonism toward Jesus Christ, but not necessarily. Most agnostics who are serious about their belief have sincere reasons for that faith. By definition they claim to not know who God is. Clearly they do not know Jesus Christ in a relational sense—they have no salvific relationship with Him. Even St. Paul reminded the Athenian philosophers that God had already begun a relationship with them because they are “his offspring” (Acts 17:29). It is important in sharing with an agnostic—especially one who is close to you—to be respectful of the reasons, both intellectual and emotional, for his refusal to engage Jesus Christ in relationship. It is also important to keep in mind St. Paul’s words to the Corinthians: “We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us. This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words. The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned” (1 Corinthians 3:12-15). Your job is not to argue the agnostic into faith or think that merely quoting “the right answer” will grant him eternal life. Your job is to tell the Holy Spirit’s story—the story of a God whose son was lifted up on a vile torture device because his love for the agnostic was too great to hold back from any pain. The immortal God endured a painful death because there was no threat greater than a lost relationship with one of his creation! That is the story you proclaim in both word and deed as Christ lives and dwells in your whole testimony.

## Questions to Consider:

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- What aspects of the biblical story (from Creation to Salvation to Restoration) most powerfully speak to me and why?
- How has my relationship with Christ enriched my life? What have I had to give up in my life because of my relationship with Christ? How do I deal with those gains and losses?
- I have an agnostic friend: what experiences seem to shape her views on God? What about the biblical story addresses those views and concerns?
- How do I live “incarnationally”? That is, do I live in such a way that people can not only see Christ at work within me, but actually encounter Christ at work in them *through me*?
- What stops me from sharing Christ’s story with others? Are these concerns legitimate? How can I alleviate, or at least hinder, them from preventing me to witness to all I have seen and heard?

“...the mystery has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to the saints. To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery which is Christ in you, the hope of glory” (Col. 1:26-27)