How Do We Talk with Skeptics?

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D. A. Carson,
Series Editor

How Do We Talk with Skeptics?
Questions for Restless Minds, edited by D. A. Carson

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Series Preface

D. A. CARSON, SERIES EDITOR

The origin of this series of books lies with a group of faculty from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School (TEDS), under the leadership of Scott Manetsch. We wanted to address topics faced by today's undergraduates, especially those from Christian homes and churches.

If you are one such student, you already know what we have in mind. You know that most churches, however encouraging they may be, are not equipped to prepare you for what you will face when you enroll at university.

It's not as if you've never known any winsome atheists before going to college; it's not as if you've never thought about Islam, or the credibility of the New Testament documents, or the nature of friendship, or gender identity, or how the claims of Jesus sound too exclusive and rather narrow, or the nature of evil. But up until now you've

probably thought about such things within the shielding cocoon of a community of faith.

Now you are at college, and the communities in which you are embedded often find Christian perspectives to be at best oddly quaint and old-fashioned, if not repulsive. To use the current jargon, it's easy to become socialized into a new community, a new world.

How shall you respond? You could, of course, withdraw a little: just buckle down and study computer science or Roman history (or whatever your subject is) and refuse to engage with others. Or you could throw over your Christian heritage as something that belongs to your immature years and buy into the cultural package that surrounds you. Or—and this is what we hope you will do—you could become better informed.

But how shall you go about this? On any disputed topic, you do not have the time, and probably not the interest, to bury yourself in a couple of dozen volumes written by experts for experts. And if you did, that would be on *one* topic—and there are scores of topics that will grab the attention of the inquisitive student. On the other hand, brief pamphlets with predictable answers couched in safe slogans will prove to be neither attractive nor convincing.

So we have adopted a middle course. We have written short books pitched at undergraduates who want arguments that are accessible and stimulating, but invariably courteous. The material is comprehensive enough that it has become an important resource for pastors and other

campus leaders who devote their energies to work with students. Each book ends with a brief annotated bibliography and study questions, intended for readers who want to probe a little further.

Lexham Press is making this series available both as attractive books and digitally in new formats (ebook and Logos resource). We hope and pray you will find them helpful and convincing.

INTRODUCTION

For the Christmas break, I watched *Bumblebee*, which is a fun installment in the *Transformers* franchise. In the final scene, after good has triumphed over evil, the potential boyfriend, Memo (Jorge Lendeborg Jr.), tries to hold the hand of the female hero, Charlie (Hailee Steinfeld). But Charlie smiles and brushes Memo's hand away. She says something like, "No. Not ready." It's a nice way to end the movie because we have the unresolved tension between Charlie and Memo. Will they become girlfriend and boyfriend? At this stage, we won't know.

But at the same time, it shows the dilemma that Memo faces. Right now he's stuck in the dreaded Friendzone. From here, if he overplays his romantic intentions, he will drive her away. But if he underplays his romantic intentions, he will miss out on the opportunity to date her. Maybe she would've loved to be his girlfriend, if only he'd had the courage to ask!

This is similar to the dilemma many of us face as Christians. How can we talk to our nonbelieving, skeptical friends about things that matter? Right now, we're in a similar Friendzone. But we want them to be more than just our friends. We want them also to have the opportunity to know, love, and worship Jesus. But if we overplay this, we risk driving them away. They might never want to

have another awkward conversation with us again. But if we underplay this, our friends will never have the chance to hear about Jesus. Maybe they would've gladly believed in Jesus, if only we had told them, but we didn't!

So how can we get the balance right? Let me share with you ten pointers that might help. I'm not saying that they're the best way of doing this. Nor am I saying that they're the only way of doing this, as if you did this any other way you'd be doing it the wrong way. All I'm doing is sharing ten suggestions that are working for me, and maybe they'll also work for you.

1

BE REALISTIC ABOUT HOW MUCH YOU'LL TALK

Recently I was in the hospital for over two weeks as a patient. To pass the time, I watched several of Aaron Sorkin's movies—*A Few Good Men, Molly's Game*, and *The American President*. These movies don't have gunfights, car chases, or a big CGI (Computer-Generated Imagery) fight scene at the end. But what they have is dramatic tension that climaxes in a stirring speech from the lead actor. The speech is the pinnacle of the movie. The speech knocks away all opposition. It is the "drop the mic" moment. But the speech is just as unbelievable as any Hollywood gunfight, car chase, or superhero CGI fight. Because in real life, for a variety of reasons, it just wouldn't happen that way.

Maybe up until now we've pictured the moment we talk to our skeptical friends about Jesus as just like an Aaron Sorkin speech. But I'm here to explain why it probably won't happen that way.[1] That's because there are basically three scenarios for talking to nonbelievers about things that matter, such as the gospel. The first scenario is being invited to give a *public talk*—usually to a "mixed audience" of believers and nonbelievers. For example, in my work with City Bible Forum in Australia, I often give talks at cafés, pubs, and conference rooms to a variety of audiences, ranging from lawyers, traders, accountants, to high-school

students. In this scenario, I can monologue for twenty minutes and then answer whatever questions people ask me afterwards. I do almost 90–100 percent of the talking, and the audience knows very little about my personal life, apart from what I tell them. I am also in control of the agenda and direction of the conversation. As a result, the talk is a logical progression of ideas in an ordered and coherent argument. And because my talks are advertised as addressing weighty issues, I can spend most of the time talking about important things—values, worldviews, matters of faith, spirituality, and religion.

In the second scenario, we find ourselves *talking to a stranger*, whom we will never meet again. For example, in my work, I often find myself talking to the Uber driver or the person sitting next to me on the plane. In this scenario, the stranger and I will share the talking—it's a 50–50 percent split. We go back-and-forth. I talk, and they talk. Here, the person still knows very little about my personal life, but they might have some clues as to the person I am. Am I polite to the flight attendant? Did I sit in the front seat or the back seat with the Uber driver? Did I offer to share my snacks? Here, I still have some control of the agenda and direction of the conversation, but so does the other person. As a result, we might flitter between talking about things that matter and things that don't matter all that much—for example, the weather, the sports scores, and what the traffic is like.

In the third scenario, which is the topic of this chapter, we are trying to talk to close *friends and family*, whom we

might be stuck with for the rest of our lives. For example, in my work as a medical doctor, most of the doctors and nurses that I work with are nonbelievers. I also have close family members—an uncle, a cousin—who are nonbelievers. In this scenario, things are no longer so straightforward. On the one hand, we have multiple opportunities to have conversations. But on the other hand, if the conversation becomes unpleasant, things will be awkward between us every time that we have to see each other again. Another difficulty is that if we've already had a few conversations about things that matter—the environment, gun control, immigration, the gospel—and they don't agree with us, then it's highly unlikely that they will change their minds just because we bring the matter up again.

In this scenario, the nature of the conversation will be very organic. There is no logical presentation of ideas. Instead, the conversation evolves on its own accord. Furthermore, we may well find that the other person does almost 90–100 percent of the talking. We get to do only 0–10 percent of the talking! The ratio of talking versus listening is completely flipped from what it is to give a public talk. Conversely, they will know almost 100 percent of our personal life. Again, this is completely flipped from what it is when we give a public talk.

Why is this important? Because, as you probably know, the Ancient Greeks taught that there are three components to a message—*logos* (what I say), *pathos* (the way I make you feel), and *ethos* (how I live). When I give a public talk,

there is a lot of *logos* and *pathos*, but little *ethos*. But when it comes to talking to close friends and family, *ethos* becomes a huge component in our message.

The Bible has similar insights. For example, in 1 Peter 3:1–2, it says that non-believing husbands can be "won over without words by the behavior of their wives, when they see the purity and reverence of [their] lives." That is to say, in close personal relationships our *ethos*—the way we live—might be much more persuasive than our *logos*—what we say.

So we understand that there is a spectrum of engagements with nonbelievers. Giving a public talk is not the same as talking to a stranger on a plane; and talking to a stranger on a plane is not the same as talking to your roommate about Jesus. As a result, we need to be realistic in our expectations. For example, if we're talking to a close friend, we probably will not be able to give a twenty-minute monologue. And that's OK. We should not be comparing our evangelistic method with Billy Graham's at Wembley Stadium. Nor to an Aaron Sorkin speech!

But even more, it also shows the disproportionately large part that *ethos* plays in personal evangelism. What we say is important. But the more closely someone knows us, the more they will be persuaded by our way of life than merely by what we can say.

	Public Talk	Talking to a Stranger	Friends/ Family
You Talking	90–100%	50%	0–10%
You Listening	0–10%	50%	90–100%
Your Personal Life Shared	0–10%	20–30%	90–100%
Nature of Conversation	logical, linear, orderly	back-and-forth	organic, unstructured
Type of conversation	one-off monologue	one-off conversation	multiple conversations