

Beginning an Evangelistic Conversation

A couple of preliminaries:

- 1) Whenever you meet a new person, try to identify yourself as a Christian right away. Perhaps something you are wearing will help. Refer to it. Or mention having been to church or Bible study. Even if you go no further along these lines then, it will help later.
- 2) Consider finding a “niche.” For example, LCMS President A. L. Barry (1931-2001) made the seat next to him on an airplane his “niche.” He would say, “I promised myself that I was going to talk about Jesus with whoever would be sitting in this seat, and that’s you.”

Below are three encouragements, A, B, and C. Each of them stands independent of the others. Perhaps you will encounter a situation in which you can use more than one of these three suggestions. However, please bear in mind that they are not listed here with the intention that you will utilize the second one only after using the first one, etc.

A. To begin talking about God and church, you can ask someone:

- *In which church (or religious tradition) were you raised?* (as suggested by Dr. Wallace Schulz, formerly of *The Lutheran Hour*) People are usually not defensive about this, for they themselves had no control over where they were raised.
- Alternatively, you could say: *I’m baptized. Are you?*

The answer to either of the above questions will probably be short. To draw the person out more, be prepared with a follow-up question such as: *How did that work out for you?*

It is possible that people will say they were not raised in any church, or that they are not baptized. In this case, a good follow-up question can be: *In what ways can it be good for children to be raised learning about Jesus?* Specifically mention Jesus in this question, not just church. Lots of people who harbor suspicions about the church still respect Jesus, although they may regard Him simply a great moral teacher, etc.

These are beginning points for conversation. You can go on from them.

B. Open-ended questions (Thanks to Lee Strobel for permission to use these!)

- *If you could ask God one question, what would it be?*
When others respond to this, resist, resist, resist the impulse to offer an immediate answer to what question they state. Instead, go on to ask this also:
- *Why would you want to ask Him that question?*

Taken together, these two questions will help to give you a glimpse of a person’s spiritual landscape, as it were.

Often, someone’s question or the reason for asking it will raise the subject of human suffering in one way or another. If this occurs, express to the person your care and empathy over the suffering as well as you can in the situation. If your conversation partner says things that indicate misunderstandings about the Christian faith, this may not be the best moment to go about correcting such misunderstandings. Do keep them in mind, though, for future conversation. Also, you might bear in mind:

- It is a “category mistake” to conclude from the fact of suffering that there is no God. Think of an automobile motor that belches out smoke every time it starts. Something is wrong with the engine, it seems clear, but who would conclude that no one designed and built that engine?
- Suffering does not contradict the Good News of the *crucified* Christ (Dr. Norman Nagel).

C. “Church Testimony”

As distinct from “personal testimony,” which is often a rather dramatically charged story of personal conversion, Dr. Paul Foust and others have recommended the “church testimony.” In it, you talk about what your church has done for you.

a. Expressing gratitude

Church gives you a regular opportunity to say “thank you” to God for His blessings. Talk about your need to thank the One Who gave you so much! People have a sense that saying “thanks” is appropriate, which may lead them at least to appreciate your point. Usually, they will not argue and say that you don’t feel grateful or that church does not help you.

b. Being resourced for living

You can note how vital it is, in a confusing and wearying world, to have a place where you can keep your bearings and receive strength to go on fulfilling your tasks and meeting your challenges. (Note: neither of these points so far is the Good News about Jesus.)

c. Don’t forget the kids!

If you have children, you can point out how valuable church has been for them. They also need to express gratitude. And they too need resources for living from day to day. Even if you do not have kids, you can point out that church offers all this for children. Again, however, we are not yet at the Gospel.

d. Prepared to die

Say something like this: “Above and beyond all else, the most important thing my church has done for me is that it has gotten me ready to die.” You can add the Bible passage: “The wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 6:23). Now you are poised to speak both God’s Law and His Gospel, as needed.

(See Paul J. Foust, *Reborn to Multiply: Tested Techniques for Personal Evangelism* [St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1973], 27ff.)