

Mere Ambassadors

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I was out for a run on a beautiful afternoon when I approached the intersection of 3rd Avenue and Pike Street in downtown Seattle. There, with a sign and a megaphone, stood a fellow Christian brother shouting at passersby about the deficiencies in their soteriological status and the inevitable future that awaited them if they didn't turn from their wicked ways. Actually, his message was much simpler, "You're all sinners! Repent or die."

A crowd of listeners who refused to make eye contact with the street preacher stood waiting for the pedestrian signal to turn white. One of them blurted out, loudly enough for all to hear, "Well, I was an atheist when I stopped for the light, but this changes everything."

It was a cringe-worthy moment, but I couldn't help myself. When the crowd dispersed, I approached the man with the sign. "Everything you're saying is true, of course, but do you really think this is the most effective way to deliver the message?"

He paused to glare at me and replied, "How dare you be ashamed of the gospel!"

And with that, before our conversation could even begin with a bang...it ended with a whimper!

Celebrity Spokesmen. Though some would find the Seattle street preacher exasperating, I actually admire many like him for the fortitude and courage they display in doing what they do day in and day out. I am not afraid of the truth of the gospel; I just wish some of them would mix it with more grace. But what do we do with the Christian spokesperson whose message seems at best tangential to the gospel,

and whose megaphone is the national media? How should an everyday, street-level apologist handle the backlash the Christian community receives from the very public statements of those who seem to make headlines instead of making a clearly reasoned case for the faith?

The examples are legendary. They come from well-known Christian figures who have declared that natural disasters are God's punishment for our national sins,¹ peddled personal prosperity as an indicator of spiritual maturity, rigorously defended stances on controversial cultural issues that clearly undermine biblical views on the nature of God's created order,² or rationalized immoral behavior as an unfortunate but tolerable side effect of the requirement to maintain political power. Though their positions may represent the fringes of what most of us would even consider heterodoxy, examples like these are what define Christianity for many in our society who are judging our faith based on the sound bites they get from the news.

As some have said, the gospel is offensive enough to a culture hell-bent on defying it. We don't need to make it more so. But when it comes to high-profile proclamations like these, the gospel doesn't even seem to be in play. It gets lost in a public theater of the absurd and buried under an avalanche of disconcerting rhetoric. Then we are left to deal with the aftermath in our own little corners of the world. Instances like these certainly don't make our evangelism any easier.

Reject Ridicule. Unfortunately, there is always the temptation to separate ourselves from the ridiculous by engaging in our own form of ridicule. We want to assure everyone we know that what they just heard in the news "is not *my* Christianity," so we move a little too quickly to throw the offending believer under the bus.

This is not to say there is no place for criticizing a hurtful or untruthful message — of course there is. But for those with whom we actually have a personal relationship, the way we go about critiquing that message can become a powerful antidote to the harm and confusion it caused. If our goal is evangelism, we need to think beyond the immediate relief we feel at separating ourselves from the ridiculous and focus instead on the greater goal of reflecting the character and cause of Christ.

While the inclination to "thank God that I am not like other men" may be completely justified, acting on that inclination is not the wisest option. Jesus addressed the whole "virtue signaling" issue two thousand years ago in the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector. Its implications are pretty clear.³ In the

end, the errant Christian newsmaker will be humbled. But the lesson he learns in humility will not come from us.

When the apostle Paul thought his colleague Peter was being a monumental hypocrite, he dealt with the issue directly but not publicly. Note the details we are given about Paul's approach to this issue.

After years of contemplation and prayer, Paul sought clarification on the gospel message he would "preach among the Gentiles. But [he] did this privately to those who seemed to be the leaders."⁴ Later, "when Peter came to Antioch, [Paul] opposed [Peter] to his face, because he was clearly in the wrong....When [he] saw [the leaders] were not acting in line with the truth of the gospel,"⁵ he confronted Peter *in front of the church leadership* about the harmfulness of his methods.

Paul's approach should be instructive for those of us who are embarrassed by outrageous Christian headlines but who also have no real-world connection to them. Influential Christian leaders have a duty to correct them boldly, but they can do so in private; we can't. We certainly cannot justify launching invectives against them from our Facebook page. The gospel doesn't win when we dive into the social media cesspool with those who choose to swim there. "A man who lacks judgment derides his neighbor, but a man of understanding holds his tongue."⁶

This is both biblical and pragmatic. The public figures we may be tempted to mock surely will never see or hear our criticism. Our friends and family, however, will have a front row seat, not only to what may sound like an outrageous view on a topic they hear about in the news but also to the equally uncharitable response from someone *they believe shares the identical worldview*.

The fact that we may disagree completely with the position broadcasted by a vocal, public figure is lost on those who don't know histrionics from hermeneutics. For them, public ridicule simply serves as further proof of the irrationality and inconsistency of Christianity itself.

Artful Ambassadorship. Yes, we can disagree with and critique the flawed ideas of influential public people who we believe misrepresent the Christian worldview. But in this age of endless news cycles and keyboard warriors, we need to reject the temptation to do so loudly and quickly. The news media that encourages these types of controversies also are notorious for being inaccurate, unfair, hyperbolic, and divisive. People's words are taken out of context or misquoted. Circumstances are misrepresented. Meanings are twisted. None of this is conducive to a fruitful discussion.

For that reason, our initial response should be silence. Don't bring it up. Don't take part in the inevitable social media firestorm or water cooler condemnation sessions. Wait to get clarification of the details. If making the case for our faith relies on grace and truth, we better be sure we have the facts before we weigh in on the matter. Truth matters. But, even if it turns out that the newsmaker's position has been represented fairly, we can enhance our own credibility by simply being gracious enough to offer them the benefit of the doubt before we join the discussion.

Once we decide to offer our point of view, however, the nature of our response depends on whether or not we are talking to a believer. If so, we clearly and graciously can give the theological or philosophical reasons we find the newsmaker's public proclamations to be out-of-bounds. If not, we must be disciplined in remembering that we are engaged in evangelism, not debate.

Our goal is not to disprove the specific position of a Christian who has made the news. Our goal is to create the conditions where a human being made in the image of God recognizes that he is a rebel to whom Christ offers good news. In sharp contrast with the kind of environment that spawns these kinds of situations, *effective* evangelism takes place in an atmosphere that is personal, gracious, and unifying. Ironically, the shared criticism of a fringe newsmaker's message can serve to put an astute apologist on common ground with an unbeliever. Ask questions. Find out what they believe about the topic being discussed. Focus on areas of agreement and moral clarity. Encourage them not to dismiss Christianity based on the actions of those who may misrepresent it. Use the controversy as a backdrop to differentiate and illuminate a more orthodox view of the faith.

There is no getting around the fact that ambassadors must know the details of their sovereign's position and be gracious in presenting it. Being an *effective* ambassador entails doing so under difficult, uncomfortable circumstances where a lot is at stake. We may not appreciate the kind of environment in which we are forced to operate sometimes, but, in the current culture, the reality is that media firestorms have become the norm, and the megaphone seems to get placed in the hands of those who already shout the loudest.

Most of us are not in the position to stop that even if we could, but we are still ambassadors. Our duty is not to fuel the uproar but to infuse the serenity of truth and grace in a world that may find it hard to hear us.

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NOTES

1. Jonathan Merritt, “Christianity’s Crazy Uncle,” *The Week*, October 17, 2016, <https://theweek.com/articles/654452/pat-robertson-christianitys-crazy-uncle>.
2. Chuck McKnight, “Southern Baptist Preacher Affirms Polyamory,” *Patheos*, September 26, 2017, <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/hippieheretic/2017/09/southern-baptist-precheraffirms-polyamory-interview-with-rev-dr-jeff-hood.html>.
3. Luke 18:9–14.
4. Galatians 2:1–2.
5. Galatians 2:11–21.
6. Proverbs 11:12.