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How to Reach Our Progressive Friends

A History of Progressive Christianity - 5: Three Ways to Have Better Conversations with Our Progressive Friends

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Several years ago, I went through an intense time of doubt after my faith was rocked in a class led by a pastor who admitted he was an agnostic, and who would later identify himself as a “progressive Christian.” At the time, I had never heard of progressive Christianity. Our class was just a dozen or so sincere Christians who wanted to think deeper about our faith. But as the class progressed, my discomfort with what was being taught grew deeper. Historic doctrines were picked apart and discarded while biblical teachings were discredited. New doctrines and beliefs were put in their place. I watched with sadness as many of my classmates became beguiled by this new kind of Christianity.

These were smart and earnest people. They invested countless hours each week reading, studying, and preparing for the next class discussion. They were deeply persuaded that the church had gotten Christianity wrong and that it needed to be re-framed for a modern

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context. Many of them began to share the reasons they were changing their minds about key defining factors of Christianity.

One classmate expressed that despite the fervent prayers of his family and church community, his wife's chronic and painful physical ailments had never improved. Another classmate shared that he had visited a Buddhist temple in Thailand and observed the sincerity of the monks' prayers as they lie prostrate. He expressed that he could not believe that God would reject their worship. Still another articulated that he had grown up in a hyper-legalistic sect of Christianity that vilified other denominations and taught that everyone except for their small circle was going to hell. Another explained that she abandoned her beliefs after reading difficult passages in Scripture that challenged her view of God's character. Others abandoned their prior beliefs because they had come to disagree with the sexual ethics taught in the Bible. Since then, I've met people who embraced progressive Christianity after witnessing hypocrisy, surviving abuse, or being taught caricatured versions of core doctrines in their given church settings.

As several of my friends began identifying themselves as progressive Christians, conversations became more difficult. Sometimes we talked past each other and misunderstood each other. After I left the class and went through [my own doubt](#) and deconstruction, some Christians in my life reacted in ways that were helpful, others not so helpful. Here are three things I've learned about how to have better conversations, especially surrounding topics in which emotions run high.

Three things I've learned about how to have better conversations with my progressive friends

Understand the context

It's commonly said that we should look for the question behind the question. This means that we should not only seek to provide an answer, but we should seek to understand *why* the person is asking in the first place. For example, often when someone asks a question about the goodness of God or why He might allow suffering in the world, he most likely isn't making an abstract philosophical inquiry. If a woman has just lost her husband to a car accident involving a drunk driver, she is probably not looking for a dissertation on free-will vs. predestination when she asks, "[How could God allow evil?](#)"

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In my research, I've discovered that one of the main reasons people deconstruct into progressive Christianity is because they have an unresolved answer to the problem of evil. In recent years, former Caedmon's Call lead singer, Derek Webb, declared atheism after a long association with progressive Christianity. In a [podcast episode](#) describing his journey, he expressed that God is either non-existent or he's evil. (Webb used a much more colorful metaphor).



Lisa Gungor, one half of the Christian musical duo, Gungor, [communicated](#) that her deconstruction from a more conservative Christian faith was a result of hitting rock bottom after her cousin's bout with cancer. There are very real stories, faces, and experiences that inform the types of questions we all ask.

It's important to be good listeners. James 1:19 says, "Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry." People can end up talking past each other if they don't listen deeply to one another's comments and questions while seeking to understand.

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Ask good questions

Conversations surrounding progressive Christianity are often emotionally charged. One way to avoid unnecessary conflict and diffuse tension is to ask really good questions. When you don't make truth claims, you *avoid having to defend* those truth claims. That's not to say we shouldn't ever speak truth. There is a time for that. But rather than trying to hit your progressive friend with an internet-winning zinger, asking a well-placed question is a powerful way to not only better comprehend their belief, but to actually expose its weak points.

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The burden of proof is on the one who is making the claim—not the other way around. Once, a progressive friend claimed that Jesus was not judgmental, didn't exclude anyone, and would never use labels to describe people. My knee-jerk reaction was to point out that according to the Bible, Jesus is actually THE judge of everyone who has ever lived or will live. That he excluded lots of people, including the money changers whose temple tables he flipped, along with "everyone who does not do the will of my Father" (Matthew 7:22-23). And that he actually used labels to describe people [all the time](#). For example, he called the aforementioned money changers "robbers."

However, I resisted the urge to drop the truth bomb and asked a question instead. "That's interesting. Where do you get your information about Jesus from?" She blinked in stunned silence for several seconds before speaking hesitantly, "Um. Well, I guess I got it from the Bible when I was younger." I replied, "So, have you read about what Jesus did in Luke 10 when the cities of Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum didn't repent after they witnessed his miracles?" (Spoiler alert: He condemned them to hell.) "I don't think so," she responded. I continued, "In fact, have you read about when Jesus called various people, "Enemies, pagans, dogs, foolish, and cursed?" The look on her face indicated that this was new information. But because I had simply asked questions, she was *invited in*, rather than rebuffed. She asked me to share some Scriptures with her, and toward the end of our conversation responded, "Okay. I need to think about this some more."

In my opinion, that's a successful conversation. And all I did was ask questions! This not only kept the discussion from becoming hostile, but it helped my friend to see her blind spots and swung the door open for more communication. (And for the record, it goes both ways. I've had people ask *me* smart questions that led me to admit where I had been wrong.)

Live out the beauty of the true gospel

In class, I listened to story after story of friends who had inherited a faith that was nothing more than moralism with a distant God. In some cases, it was harsh and unloving. In other cases, compassion for the poor and oppressed was not present.



I am so thankful that my dad was a lost hippie who had searched for God through Eastern philosophies,

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Buddhism, and psychedelic drugs before he committed his life to Christ. He wasn't raised as a born-again Christian. He didn't grow up in a church that majored in pizza parties and minored in theology. He didn't have any baggage that clouded his view of the gospel. Yet in a little country church in Southern California, he heard the gospel for the first time and was struck by its beauty and simplicity. A sinner saved by grace.

I am so thankful that my mom had a strong ambition to feed the hungry and clothe the poor. This was the Christianity that was modeled for me. When I encountered intellectual doubt for the first time as an adult, the grief over what I stood to lose was incalculable. This was because of *how beautiful I already thought the gospel was*.

As simple as it may seem, modeling consistent Bible study, a vibrant prayer life, repentance, acts of service, and genuine care for our neighbor is one of the most powerful tools to draw people to Christ, especially if they've been burned by the church.

As Christians, if we really believe the gospel is beautiful, we should live it loudly! As Paul said, "I am not ashamed of the gospel." Of course, Paul also said that not everyone will think the gospel is so attractive. He wrote that when he and his friends preached the gospel, they were "the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing." (2 Cor. 2:15)

He went on to write that to some, they smelled like life. To others, they smelled like death. The same will be true of genuine followers of Christ. Not everyone will think we (and our message) smells very good. But our job is to seek to understand and share the true gospel no matter who might think it stinks. Because to those whom God is saving, it will be the "fragrance of life to life."

Go Deeper:

- [The History of Progressive Christianity: Progressive Christianity Part 1](#)
- [How to Spot Progressive Christianity – Cultural Signs: Progressive Christianity Part 2](#)
- [How to Spot Progressive Christianity – Theological Signs: Progressive Christianity Part 3](#)
- [Original Sin or Original Blessing: Progressive Christianity Part 4](#)

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