

How to Talk About God and Politics in Polarized Times

How do we talk about Big Things when it seems so risky? It feels hard these days to even mention Jesus in conversation when we are faced with hostility toward Christianity. As faith is declining in the West, how will people find Christ if we can't talk about him with nonbelieving friends and family? Our churches, families, and communities often feel so polarized we can't talk about politics or values either.

So we're understandably wary of talking about God or Christ or politics with anyone outside our close circles, and sometimes even within them. We fear it will just lead to arguments or damage our relationships. We don't have the answers to tough questions. We can't even agree on the facts. Loved ones seem uninterested or resentful about views different from their own. Small wonder we avoid evangelism and political conversation with friends and family, never mind strangers.

But I am confident there's an effective, enjoyable, and winsome way to talk with people about Christ that also works well in discussions about any sensitive issue, even in heated times.

For years now, my students have used a simple method to have excellent "hot topic" conversations with friends they strongly disagree with—conversations about every conceivable political issue around the world. "It went so well," they often report, "my friend and I feel closer now, and we want to have more conversations like that."

I've seen the power of this method firsthand. For example, when I used this method a few months ago in a conversation with a secular friend, he said as we parted, "That was the best conversation I've ever had." We'd been talking about God for two hours. This method has also equipped me to talk with people I disagree with about highly charged political issues in lengthy conversations that leave us feeling energized and warm toward each other.

Knowing how to discuss important and sensitive topics can make you a better friend, family member, and follower of Jesus. It's not about winning an argument; it's about being more loving and connecting more deeply and joyfully with someone you care about. It may also be the best way to help gradually change someone's heart. The Barna Group found that an approach like this is the most effective way to reach nonbelievers. Best of all, it's a method that's surprisingly learnable.

The key is three words: **paraphrase**, **praise**, and **probe**. The method: Privately, over coffee or a meal, nudge the conversation into a Big Topic and ask your friend what they think about it. Then:

1. Paraphrase: Repeat the gist of your friend's thoughts so well they say, "Exactly!"
2. Praise: Highlight anything they said that you can sincerely honor.
3. Probe: Ask about your concerns, curiosities, and confusions as a co-seeker of truth.

Do this two or three times. Then, share your own perspective and let the conversation unfold from there, returning to *paraphrase, praise, probe* whenever there's tension. When you want to exit the conversation, simply express gratitude and change the subject: "Thank you. I've enjoyed this. You've given me a lot to think about. Let's talk more about it another time. How's your weekend looking?"

Here's an example of how it works. You mention to your friend, "I see X died the other day. What do you think happens when we die?" She replies, and you paraphrase back to her, "So you're saying death really is the end, and the afterlife is just wishful thinking. And believing a fantasy like that is a distraction from the important work of caring for people here and now. Am I getting that right?"

"Exactly!"

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Then you add, “I appreciate your concern about this life and your worry that someone might focus on the afterlife too much and stop caring about this one. I so appreciate your commitment to taking care of people here and now. I share it.” She breathes a sigh of relief.

Then you probe: “So let me hear more. How do we get to that conclusion that this is all there is?” Whatever she replies is useful. You paraphrase, praise, and probe again, delving more deeply into her thoughts, feelings and, perhaps, her story (which may be particularly illuminating).

Eventually, the conversation generally becomes safe and rich enough that your friend is open to and interested in hearing your own perspective: “I do find a faith in an afterlife makes me more focused on this one. For example . . .” And you’ve begun a rich and often eye-opening conversation.

Though they usually do quite well with it, students sometimes struggle with this method when they use it spontaneously. Some casually turn to it in the middle of an argument, after things have gotten testy. Not good. Others try to use it in a group setting where others can chime in, interrupt, and argue. One tried it at a bar. Ugh.

I’ve seen most of my students do better when they plan ahead for a private conversation and choose a quiet, comfortable setting. They might invite a friend to talk about a topic or simply watch for an occasion to use this method during a conversation. For a conversation about Christ, it may be better to take an indirect approach, looking for a topic that touches on spiritual matters, like an event that raises the problem of evil or a movie that raises a philosophical question.

Why is *Paraphrase, Praise, Probe* so effective? First, because it’s grounded in humility, a quality that’s so winsome that the most admired people are renowned for it—Mother Theresa, Nelson Mandela, Abraham Lincoln, and far more importantly, Christ himself.

This approach also adds safety and lowers defensiveness because it validates and respects the other person without requiring you to agree with their conclusions. People feel safe and relax when they sense you deeply respect them, and they trust you more. The approach also slows the conversation down, making you both less reactive.

Also, it gives you a chance to learn and frees you from having to rebut points you don’t have answers for. (“That’s an intriguing point. I have more to learn about that.”) Barna found that Christians who listen generously like this are markedly more winsome; nonbelievers say they’re much more open to further conversation and learning about Christ from someone who listens to them than from someone who tries a hard-sell approach.

Paraphrase, Praise, Probe also lets us emulate the apostle Paul’s approach to evangelism. In Acts 17, we see Paul at the Areopagus reasoning with the Athenians, demonstrating he deeply understands their beliefs then praising them for their religiosity before speaking about Christ.

As Tim Keller observed, if Christians just monologue and argue, we’ll get nowhere with unbelievers. Paul, he notes, is not preaching in that passage of Acts. Rather, Paul is “entering into dialogue . . . a Socratic method.” That means, Keller explains, that you should come inside the other person’s perspective and listen sympathetically. Then and only then do you challenge their view from its own standards. In other words, you probe.

In fact, knowing how to talk about Big Things with our perceived opponents or true enemies can transform us and them.

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Daryl Davis, an African American R & B musician, dialogued with KKK leaders and, in the process, led dozens of them out of the Klan, moving them to repent of their racism. Yet he never asked them to do so—he just had generous and inquisitive conversations with them. The ability to talk across chasms of thought can make us peacemakers and agents for change.

Here, then, are two safe, easy ways to practice using *Paraphrase, Praise, Probe*:

Watch a YouTube interview of someone you strongly disagree with. Stop the video, practice *Paraphrase, Praise, Probe*, resume the video, and then repeat. Perhaps get feedback from a friend who's watching you.

Or, try it with a friend this week. Choose someone you usually agree with and pick a *nonreligious* topic you each care about somewhat but not passionately (Minimum wage? Greatest basketball player?). Invite your friend to talk about this topic with you for 15 minutes. Intentionally use *Paraphrase, Praise, Probe*. See what effect it has, get some feedback afterwards, and then try it again the following week with someone else, perhaps nudging a conversation toward God, salvation, or another Big Thing.

We change the world by the way we listen and talk. *Paraphrase, Praise, Probe* can help us be that change, living out more fully on Monday what we pray to become on Sunday, helping us act more like the God we want others to know. It can help us gently, safely start conversations that could one day lead a person to Christ. Additionally, it can help us build bridges across political and ideological divides. What could be better?