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## How Can I Initiate a Conversation with Someone Who Thinks He's a Christian but Isn't?

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### #STRask - Stand to Reason

Questions about initiating conversations with someone who thinks he's going to Heaven but who isn't showing any signs he's following God, how to talk to unsaved friends and family who identify as Christians, and resources to help someone learn what true Christianity is.

- \* How can I initiate a conversation with my brother who thinks he's going to Heaven because he has an intellectual belief that Jesus is the Son of God, but who doesn't really show any signs that he's following God?
- \* How would you suggest talking to friends or family who identify as Christians despite strong evidence they're merely nominal or cultural Christians?
- \* Are there resources I can share with my brother that will help him learn what true Christianity is?

### Transcript

MUSIC This is Stand to Reason. Hashtag S-T-R-Ask Podcast. Welcome.

Greg, today, today. Well, we're in the last episode, and the second question that we had was about easy beliefism and only needing to believe in Jesus to be saved, but then, you know, your life reflects that. So, I have a few questions that follow somewhat from that, and I have one from Jim, one from Mike, and one from Anonymous, and they're all fairly similar, but they're asking for a little bit different things from you.

So, here we go. The first one comes from Jim. My brother thinks he's going to heaven because he has an intellectual belief that Jesus is the Son of God, but he lives like a non-believer and doesn't really show any signs that he's following God.

I'm afraid he's going to fall into a group of people like Matthew 7, 23. We're not very close. How can I initiate a conversation to bring this up? Oh, I think I'm groaning because I think this is a

difficult issue to deal with, and the reason is, is because essentially what you're saying to your brother or your friends, whoever are facing this kind of circumstances, you think you're saved, but you're not.

That's a hard sell. And of course, we don't say it quite so bluntly, but that's the basic thing that we're communicating, and we have to find a way to express that. And it's going to be different, I think, with different kinds of relationships.

I think one way of addressing that, and I've talked about this before, is to ask the person, and this is a little bit more of a distant relationship. You say, you know, you've talked to me about you being a Christian, but I'm confused about that a little bit. Can you tell me what you think it means, or what do you mean when you say that? Now, 65% apparently other people in this country self-identify as Christians, but it's obvious that those 65% are not disciples of Jesus and followers of Jesus in any robust sense.

And so there is a difference between identifying as a Christian, and there's got to be scare quotes around that, because there are so many different ways of understanding what that means. Nowadays, a hundred years ago, I don't think that was the case, but certainly nowadays it is. And there is a biblical understanding of what that means.

The biblical understanding is Christians where the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch, so somebody else used the word. But it was of the disciples who the disciple is a follower of Jesus, a disciplined follower, you know, someone who's committed. Now, of course, you could be in the larger Christian group and not be a follower of the biblical Jesus in any meaningful sense.

And so that's why if a person's life is not, seem to evidence the kinds of behaviors and et cetera that go along with being a follower of Jesus, then one wonders what it is they mean when they say they are a Christian. All right. And so that I think is a fair question to ask.

I'm confused about this. You say you're a Christian. Now, that one is for a more distant relationship, and they might say, well, why do you ask that? Well, I just see these things in your life, and I'm not trying to judge you right now, but I'm just making an observation.

So we're offering a qualification to make it easier for them to listen. It is actually a kind of a judgment. But we're not coming in in a condescending judgmental fashion.

We're trying to figure this out. And we're making an assessment, which is entirely appropriate. And we're saying, I just see this behavior in your life.

It does not seem to me to be consistent with being faithful to Jesus. Now, and this is where I think choosing the wording is going to be important. Because if you say it's not consistent with being a Christian, well, now you've just.

You've just replayed that ambiguous word, and you brought the same ambiguity along with it.

And so if you rephrase it and say it doesn't seem to be consistent with being a faithful follower of Jesus. Okay.

Now you're adding some definition to the word Christian. A Christian is a faithful follower. Okay.

And I think that's a fair way of characterizing it given the text. Why do you call me Lord, Lord Jesus said, and you don't do the things that I say. Okay.

So being a Christian means following Jesus to be a disciple of Jesus. And sometimes I'll say when somebody seems and I'm talking to maybe somebody I just met on an airplane or wherever. I might say if they're expressing some religious conviction or belief in our conversation.

I might not instead of asking are you a Christian though I sometimes do that, but I might just say, oh, so you love the Lord. Do you love the Lord? Now that's a very different way of saying it. Now all Christians love the Lord.

Okay. A real Christians. All those who love the Lord are Christians, but not all Christians, quote unquote, would characterize themselves as being lovers of the Lord.

And that's what I'm looking for. I'm looking for what that response is going to be. Well, I don't know.

I never put it that way. Well, they might respond that way. So what I'm trying to get them to do is to think about the lifestyle that they have in light of their profession to be a follower of Jesus or a Christian of some sort.

And that's why I'm asking you tell me what you mean by that. And then that's a pretext then for further conversation. Okay.

Now, there is something that I found helpful and I've talked about it before and it's Romans eight. And Romans eight talks about those who are after the spirit and those who are living after the flesh. And I take this to be a trajectory, a way of living one's life.

And what Paul is saying there is that there are some who are living after the flesh. And that I don't think that means that they're as bad as they could be. It just means like they're like everybody else who don't have the spirit of God.

And that's a distinction, Paul makes. He says, you are not in the flesh. If the spirit of God dwells in you, but if you don't have the spirit, you're not his.

So Paul's distinction there is those who are in the spirit are ones who possess the spirit and those who are in the flesh are ones who don't possess the spirit. Those in the flesh who don't possess the spirit can be really nice people, but they're on the worldly trajectory, so to speak. And those who are living according to the spirit, as he says a little later, are putting to death the

deeds of the flesh.

So there are two distinctions here. And I think this is a very helpful motif to be able to understand the difference between nice people who make claims to be Christians. But aren't.

And those who are regenerate followers of Jesus. And that is what trajectory are you on? If a person claims to be a Christian and their life shows no distinction from anybody else in the world who's not, then it's likely they aren't. And if they're living like everyone else in virtually all manners of their life, then they are probably going to fair the way everybody fares in the final judgment before God, who is living for themselves and not for him.

They're in that category, no matter what they say. So I found that this trajectory concept that we see represented in Romans eight is a maybe a helpful way of looking at it. Now I mentioned a way of addressing somebody who's close, who's not close.

What do you mean by that? When you say you mentioned this a few times and I'm just curious about this. And then that's the conversation. You could use that with, in this case, Jim could use that with his brother, but in a closer relationship, I think you can be a little bit more direct.

And so Jim might be willing to say, well, bro, let's call him Bob. Bob, you know, I'm concerned about you. And the reason I'm concerned is because though you profess Christianity, I don't see any of that in your life.

And Jesus makes a distinction between those who talk about it and those who live it. That just puts you in a very dangerous position because you think you're safe when you may not be. I mean, I think that would be a fair way to approach it.

Notice it's not condescending. It's not harsh. It's not nasty.

It's expressing concern. And it's a legitimate concern because we're working with biblical categories here. And I don't see any heart for Jesus.

Any, any, any way that your apparent love for Jesus or commitment to him influences any of your decisions. And that makes me wonder whether you're on a totally different trajectory. And when you meet Jesus face to face, he is going to say, I never knew you.

Now, that's a conversation which is more direct, obviously, but it's the kind of thing you could have with somebody much closer. And see what happens. There's no silver bullet here.

Like I said, it's difficult. I think this circumstance because these are people who think they're believers when they're clearly not. Yeah, I agree, Greg, that there can be a different approach for somebody that you are close to versus somebody that you're not that close to.

Now, obviously, if there's somebody in your life who is who thinks they're Christian, but they're clearly not and we're just going to just for the hypothetical situation. They're not a Christian. We know.

We know for sure. The best thing to happen is for them to become a Christian. The second best thing to happen is for them to realize they're not a Christian.

Those are the two best outcomes here. They're in the worst situation right now where they're not even considering Christianity because they think they know what it means to be a Christian when they're not. They really are right.

So those are the those are the two things that you can aim for, I guess, if you want to help them to understand that they're not or they don't want to be or whatever it is. Now, the first thing I want to say would apply to somebody who's either close or not. If they're saying they're Christian, this actually is a great opportunity because you can freely talk about all sorts of things.

You know, under the without confronting them and saying, I don't think you're a Christian, you can just talk to them about your Christianity, like who you are, how you're living, what, how you're thinking through things. Sometimes people just have never met somebody who's actually living for God who actually knows him and loves him and is seeking him and is excited about who he is and what he's done. They've just never encountered that.

The only Christianity that they've encountered is what they're doing. Maybe they're going to church. Maybe they're not even going to church, whatever it is.

Right. So sometimes all they need to do is see your love for God and that can be enough to spark something in them, some curiosity. That's not how I live.

I wonder what that's about. Why are you talking about Jesus all the time or why do you care about what he thinks? So that's the first thing I would do. If they're saying they're Christian, then you can openly talk about Jesus all the time without fear of being shot down or getting people getting mad at you or whatever.

So that's the first thing I would do. I would just help them see what it means to follow Jesus and give them a taste for the beauty of Jesus and see what the Holy Spirit does through that. So bottom line, show them the beauty of Jesus and the gospel.

So not just who God is, but the beauty of having your guilt forgiven and being open about your sins and not having to pretend like you're perfect. Thank goodness. I don't have to be perfect and I could admit that I'm a sinner.

Because you are not. And you can talk about that. I'm so glad that I'm free from this and that God loves me and accepts me.

So you can be putting the gospel out there all the time and show them the beauty of that. Now, if it's somebody close to you, one thing you might want to ask, if there's something specific you're seeing in their life, it's unclear. Jim just says he lives like a nonbeliever.

But if there's something in particular, maybe what you could ask is, I'm just trying to figure out where you stand with Jesus. If Jesus asked you to give that up, would you follow him or would you keep doing it? I think we all have to decide where we stand in that. And you don't even have to answer me.

Just think about that. Just to figure out if you're really following him or not. But the presumption of the thing that you're talking about is that the thing is inconsistent with being a Christian.

If you ask you to do that in particular, like maybe living with your girlfriend or something like that. Yeah, it could be something like that. Which, by the way, is a standard kind of error in this culture.

People can claim to be Christian and be sleeping around or living with their girlfriend or boyfriend or whatever. And they don't see any inconsistency because the culture doesn't see any inconsistency. And that's what they're following.

They're following the cultural ethic. But Paul says in 1 Corinthians 6 that those who live in fornication will not inherit the kingdom. He's very blunt about it.

In fact, he starts the comment by saying, do not be deceived. And sometimes maybe that's a passage that would be useful if a person is open to hearing it. There is a place for warnings for sure.

Now, the very similar question comes from Mike. And he is asking how you might not have anything to add. But he says, how would you suggest talking to friends or family who identify as Christians.

But in their case, there's strong evidence that they're merely nominal or cultural Christians and therefore still need to be saved. Despite their belief that they're going to heaven. Yeah, like I said, this is one of the most difficult because you want to offer an antidote that it's clear that they need.

And they think they are already, they already possess the antidote when they don't. And so it's a false assurance, which is why I think you have these places in scripture. James chapter 2, you show me your faith without your works.

And I will show you my faith by my works. Now, notice what is the issue there is not ultimately works. That is, what is the point of salvation or the element of salvation? It's faith.

But the external behaviors are the evidence of whether the faith is real. In fact, James says, what if I have faith in a certain sense in scare quotes there, but have no works, can that faith save me? And of course, his answer is no, not that kind because it isn't real faith. It may be a belief that, but it's not a belief in.

Now, these are prepositions or whatever that I'm using here to distinguish what we do see in

the New Testament. Many believed, but then leave. You know, Jesus wasn't entrusting himself to them because he knew it was in the heart of man.

And we talked about this more in the last episode too. Do you have anything more to add to talking to friends or family? I would just say your two options are, I guess, three options. One, curiosity and just questioning them.

Two, warning, and this all depends on how close you are so you can warn them. Or three, just demonstrating. And I think where you go on that depends on your relationship with the person.

Right, right, right. So then the third one, this one comes from anonymous and his question at the end is a little bit different. And he says his brother believes Jesus is God and he thinks that's all he needs in order to go to heaven, but he does not live a Christian life.

He seems receptive to learn more, but he's married to a Jehovah's Witness so he can't go to church without a major fight. So here's his question. Are there resources I can share with him that will help him learn what true Christianity is? Well, I'll tell you the resource that I use in circumstances like this.

It's going to sound a little self-serving, but when I travel, I always carry a copy of the story of reality. And there's actually a smaller version of sorts. It's just a section of the story of reality under a separate cover that focuses just on the material in story of reality regarding Jesus.

And that's called the story of why God died and came to life again. Okay, so that's like a third of it. So it's like story of reality light.

I carry in both because if I end up having a conversation with people, this is something I want to give them, which is not meant to challenge their false views directly. It's meant to communicate the truth to them and have them consider that. And I think this work, story of reality or the shorter one, which is available through Santa Reason by the shorter one, the story of why God died and came to life again is extremely accessible and not condescending and thoughtful and not overly religious.

Okay, and it has peppered in the text covering the basics of Christianity. It has what I would call soft apologetics, similar to what you see in mere Christianity, which I used as a pattern of sorts when I wrote this book. And so when I am having a conversation, I can think of one that I had in the summer.

I was sitting in LAX and here was a couple, newly married and I got like, they were in a, it was a restaurant thing. You know, we get in breakfast or something, have this conversation turned out they were on our way to a Roman Catholic conference. And they were very committed Catholics and fired up.

Now, in that situation, you don't take access with Catholicism. And there are things that are significantly different, especially in my view of the issue of justification. You know, what must I

do to be saved kind of question.

But I'm not going to take that on there or hear two people very committed. I got just a short period of time and I don't want to set myself up as a foe to them. I want to have a salutary impact in their life.

And so now I'm just being encouraging and saying, hey, I wrote a thing that you might be helpful. You're interested in reading it. I ended up giving them a shorter version.

And when they found out there was a longer version, they wanted that instead. So here is a work that in absentia. In other words, I'm not there being kind of a foil or a stumbling block in conversations for them.

If you set yourself up against somebody else's idea, then it's an opposition situation many times. And so, but if you give them something to read, they don't have to, you know, they don't have to refute somebody else who's in their face kind of thing. And they can read it on their own and they can digest it.

And I think the Holy Spirit then works in a different fashion there. And so I gave them that because this book, I think, really captures in a very clear way the work of the cross and a salvation to faith, justification, and a blood atonement. I mean, all the things that are critical for the foundation and also distinguishes between kind of believing in and believing that, not just an acknowledgement.

And so that's the approach that I take. If somebody wants to use something to have people read something, I would recommend the story of reality. You could also recommend C.S. Lewis, but a lot of people don't, nowadays, they have a hard time with Lewis.

It's just too difficult, which strikes me. Craig, I would 100% recommend the story of reality. I think that book is so clear and it's so readable.

I think that anyone can read that book and go away with an understanding of Christianity. And what you might want to do, Anonymous, is you can read it with him. You can say, hey, let's read this book and let's just chat about it.

So you can understand, since you can't go to church and you say you're Christian, let's think about God. Let's think about who Jesus is. Why don't you, let's just do this together.

So I think that's a great option. That would be my go to book for anyone who wants to know what Christianity is about. One of the reasons I think it's helpful is because it doesn't say Christianity in this fundamental sense versus Roman Catholicism or Jehovah's Witness or Mormonism or whatever.

It doesn't do that. It doesn't set itself up against those other kind of different ways of understanding Christianity. But it communicates a substance that does offer a corrective.



Well, thank you, Jim and Mike and Anonymous. Hopefully that will help you figure out how to talk to your friends and we really appreciate hearing from you. And if you have a question, you can send it on X with the hashtag SCRAsk or go to our website at [STR.org](http://STR.org). This is Amy Hall and Greg Coco for Stand to Reason.