

# Editorial: Tebowing, faith & 3 a.m. birthday parties

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How should Christians express their faith in a pluralistic world?

This is the vital question implicit in—but overshadowed by—professional athlete Tim Tebow’s decision to speak, and then not to speak, at [First Baptist Church in Dallas](#) next month.

## Here’s the background:

- Tebow, 25, is a quarterback who won the Heisman Trophy with the Florida Gators. As a pro, he has played for the Denver Broncos and New York Jets.



Editor Marv Knox • He’s an evangelical Christian who participates in mission trips and speaks at churches. He’s well-known for bowing to offer prayers after big plays, a posture known as “Tebowing.” And he’s counter-cultural, especially for a professional athlete, choosing to remain celibate until marriage.

- [Bleacherreport.com](#) calls Tebow “the most controversial player in the NFL.” He’s actually bi-controversial. Some fans feel he’s not good enough for the pros. And some criticize his displays of faith.

- Tebow agreed to speak at First Baptist in Dallas April 28, during

festivities dedicating the church's facilities.

- That appointment set off criticism among sportswriters who objected to Tebow's association with First Baptist's Robert Jeffress. The Dallas pastor has gained notoriety for condemnation of Roman Catholicism, Mormonism, Islam and homosexuality. Even one of Jeffress' prominent defenders acknowledged he is "often incendiary."

- Tebow backed out, citing "new information that has been brought to my attention." He pledged to "continue to use the platform God has blessed me with to bring faith, hope and love to all those needing a brighter day."

- That decision created an evangelical backlash against Jeffress' critics. Commentators pointed out Jeffress believes what millions of Christians believe. They cast Jeffress as a martyr and cited rejection by "the world" and estrangement between secular culture and Christianity.

## **The fallout**

Not surprisingly, this incident—like other culture-war battles—created more heat than light.

Some critics said reprehensible things about First Baptist and reverted to extreme metaphors to describe the pastor. Some evangelicals turned on Tebow, snarking he "Tebowed" to pressure. Meanwhile, some customarily nuanced commentators characterized criticisms of Jeffress as caustic critiques of all Christians.

Of course, some Christians agree with all Jeffress' perspectives on [Catholicism](#), [homosexuality](#), [Islam](#) and [Mormonism](#). And many—perhaps most—Baptists and evangelical Christians agree with at least some of his views.

Christians probably will debate those issues until Jesus comes back. But the

Tebow/First Baptist controversy should prompt a discussion about our speech and how we express faith.

### **Secular condemnation as a badge of honor**

Some Christians, particularly conservatives, rail at the response they receive from “the world.” They wear secular condemnation as a badge of honor: You’re not doing your job as a Christian if you’re not angering unbelievers and vilified by atheists, agnostics and adherents of other faiths. In self-defense, they quote Jesus, “Everyone will hate you because of me, but the one who stands firm to the end will be saved” (Mark 13:13).

They return fire for fire, telling the unbelieving and/or unrepentant what they think of them. And the cycle feeds its own fire.

Ironically, Christians who typically engage in rancor and vilification present themselves as evangelistic. I don’t know what outreach methods you studied, but “Insult, condemn and ridicule” is not one of the Four Spiritual Laws.

Do you wonder why people express such hatred toward Christians? Maybe it’s because of Jesus. But if you listen, you’ll hear the major reason: They think Christians hate them.

### **Love or condemnation?**

Call it an occupational hazard, but I survey atheist and free-thinker websites, listen to far-left talk shows and read the comments sections on religion sites. If Christianity were like what they describe, I wouldn’t follow Jesus, either. Unfortunately, they’re not making this up; they’re responding to people who call themselves Christian.

If all they hear from Christians sounds like hatred and condemnation, they’re not going to buy Christians’ propositional truths. Nobody accepts

beliefs offered in anger and bitterness.

Consider the number of people you know who came to Christ because someone cared for them, listened to them, sacrificed to meet their needs—loved them into faith. Now, contrast that number with the number who were denigrated and argued into submission.

Christians shout because they feel their beliefs are threatened. But maybe those arguments would carry more weight if they whispered while they acted lovingly.

### **What kind of church?**

Sociologist/professor Tony Campolo tells about a trip to Hawaii, where he found himself eating breakfast in a diner at 3:30 a.m. That happened to be when local prostitutes got off work and stopped at the diner for breakfast.

Campolo learned a prostitute, Agnes, was turning 39 years old the next day, and she never had a birthday party. Later, Campolo conspired with the owner to throw Agnes a birthday party.

Campolo bought decorations, and the owner provided a cake. When Agnes and her friends showed up, the demonstration of care stunned Agnes. Before she would cut the cake, she carried it down the street to show her mother.

In the awkward silence, Campolo stood and prayed in a diner packed with prostitutes, asking God to bless Agnes and make her new.

When he said “amen,” the diner owner called out to Campolo: “You told us you’re a professor, but you’re a preacher. What kind of church do you preach in?”

Campolo replied: “I preach in the kind of church that [throws birthday parties for whores](#) at 3:30 in the morning.”

“No!” the man said. “I would join a church like that.”

Maybe Christians would make headway in the culture wars if, instead of condemning people who believe and behave differently, we demonstrate the kind of love that throws birthday parties for whores at 3:30 in the morning.