

# 2nd Opinion: Can Christians proselytize in love?

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Early this year, Fox News commentator Brit Hume suggested Tiger Woods, a Buddhist, should turn to Christianity. The reactions were swift and severe. Jon Stewart was merciless on *The Daily Show*. In the *Washington Post*, Tom Shales predicted Hume's statement "will probably rank ... as one of the most ridiculous of the year." John Farrell of *US News* said Hume's comment was "creepy."

What can this whole tempest-in-a-teapot teach Christians who believe our faith is to be shared and who care about rhetoric and how messages are received?

- *Sincerity passes muster for many. Because of genuine belief that "all ways lead to God" and genuine confusion about whether any religion is worthwhile, it is impolitic to suggest another's sincerely held belief is wrong. This view often masquerades as "tolerance," but since the offended are not "tolerant" of the vocal Christian, surely another explanation lurks beneath the surface. Some of the challenge comes not from those who disbelieve our faith per se but from those who insist we should not argue that our beliefs are superior to theirs.*
- *"Proselytizing" has become a dirty word. It should not imply intolerance, meanness, underhanded dealings or rudeness. It merely means attempting to persuade with regard to faith. Assuming it is done with respect and without forcing the listener to participate unwillingly, why is that bad?*
- *The public failures of high-profile Christians and well-known disputes among Christians have left many thinking they have no use for our faith.*

*If you type “Brit Hume Tiger Woods” in an Internet search engine, you will see how Christianity is, in many circles, nothing more than a punch line.*

Still, Christians have something good to share. We know someone who offers—to anyone, regardless of what s/he has done—forgiveness, love and literal salvation. We are commanded to “teach all nations” and “always to be ready with an answer.” If our friends were in a burning house, and we knew the way out, we would tell them. To us, this is the same thing.

Style must be a concern. Hitting people over the head, shoving a tract into their hand, shouting them down, playing on guilt (real or manufactured), or otherwise forcing our point of view on someone who does not want to hear it or is not ready for it is fruitless and silly. No matter how good the news is, if we don’t package it appropriately and present it with respect and proper timing, we—and thus Christ—will not be well-received. If we are most eloquent but do not act with love, then we are no more than resounding gongs and clanging cymbals.

The reason “proselytizing” has gotten a bad name is related to how it has been done, not to its substance.

Those who reject Christ on the merits—and the number who actually hear and consider our faith on the merits and still reject it is pretty low in comparison to those who reject our message out of hand without considering the substance—make their decision for a variety of reasons. But almost never is it because they believe we should not have talked to them. The secret, then, is to get the conversation directed to the merits of our faith without offending.

I don’t find Hume’s comments offensive, rude or mean. But they were a stumbling block to many. The New Testament predicts this. Many in the world hate any mention of Christ.

Our response must be to recognize how our message often is received and the prejudices that are in place. Many of those stumbling blocks and prejudices are the fault of the church and of those who call themselves Christians. We have, in many ways, created a monster, and we must deal with that.

But if we agree that those who “turn to Jesus Christ” can “make a total recovery,” we have no alternative but to share what we know. We must, then, exercise sense in how we do it. And we must always do so in love.

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