

Relationship with apologist changes heart of atheist

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After deciding the church didn't have answers to his many questions about spiritual matters and the soul, Daniel Nieto declared himself an atheist at age 15.

From that point, he dove into YouTube video debates between Christians and atheists, never encountering anyone who could change his opinion.

"My favorite debaters were atheists, and they made sense to me at the time. I knew there were geniuses who were Christians, but I felt like they were wrong," said Nieto, a 32-year-old resident of Bakersfield, Calif. "I was debating online all the time, but no one could answer my questions."

In late 2021, Nieto watched a debate between Aron Ra, an atheist activist, and Eric Hernandez, apologetics lead and millennial specialist with Texas Baptists' Center for Church Health. Expecting the same results he always had experienced—Christians with weak arguments being blown away by the strong-spoken atheists—Nieto was surprised to see the opposite outcome.

"I'm really into philosophy, and when I started hearing Eric talk, he was pointing out things I'd never thought about before. It blew my mind a little, and I feel like Aron embarrassed himself in that debate," recalled Nieto, noting he watched the debate at least a dozen times.

"Eric was hitting me with the concepts and philosophies that Aron didn't know about. Eric really kept his composure. It was depressing to see my YouTube hero's mask fall off."

Intrigued, Nieto began following more content from Hernandez's ministry with Texas Baptists. He spent hours daily watching Hernandez's various debates and videos defending the faith. Nieto finally reached out via social media and began asking more questions.

Unlikely long-distance friendship developed

An unlikely friendship blossomed as Hernandez responded with truth and kindness to Nieto's many questions over the next year. Then, a phone call revealed Nieto was moving closer to a personal faith in Jesus.

"He told me he now believed in God and was not atheist or agnostic at that point," Hernandez said. "About a month later, he starts telling me how he's been getting into debates and discussions with his atheist friends, and they are attacking the Bible. It dawned on him that his friends have never read the Bible, and he hasn't really either, and he asked me about translations to go buy himself a Bible."

Hernandez knew Nieto lived in California but was not sure where, and he had a presentation coming up at a church on the West Coast. He shared the details with Nieto and invited him to come.

Nieto decided to surprise his new friend and make the 45-minute drive to hear his lecture, staying behind to speak to Hernandez afterward.

Nieto's surprise attendance led to a discussion over lunch and an invitation to attend the unApologetics conference Hernandez was planning in Texas. While that was quite a journey, Nieto decided to come, also interested in hearing Michael Jones, another Christian apologist he had been following online. The entire experience—which included time to just sit and discuss with other thinkers—was life-changing for him.

‘Proud to say that I believe in God and Jesus’

“The conference made me realize what a church was supposed to be like. If I was in front of these guys, I never would have left [the church]. I felt like I’d wasted my life as an atheist, and I was so happy to be there,” said Nieto.

“Eric is one of the smartest Christians I ever came across. He’s a blessing. Eric has changed my life and how I see the world. I’m so glad I never gave up and threw myself into the fire of philosophy to learn more.”

“I am comfortable calling myself a Christian now. I feel proud to say that I believe in God and Jesus. Now, I feel like my job is not done. Eric created another debater, in a sense, because that’s what I wanted to do. I’m starting my own show on YouTube to show atheists the real truth.”

Hernandez is encouraged by Nieto’s journey for two reasons. While he stays busy in his role with Texas Baptists planning conferences, speaking around the country and hosting video debates, his full calendar means he does not always get to know personally those who are his ultimate audience. With Nieto, he did.

He also said Nieto’s story reminds him the conversion experience is often drawn out over several years.

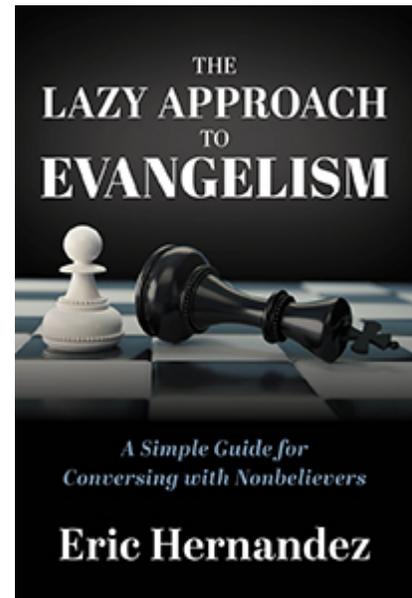
“It’s not unusual to see people moving on the faith spectrum. I get to be part of that process, but don’t usually get to see the end results,” said Hernandez. “When it comes to evangelism, people often forget that we don’t just need harvesters, we need gardeners.

“For me, apologetics is a gardening ministry. ... You have to pull the weeds and make sure there is good water and sunlight. When I meet someone who is not a believer, I ask myself ‘What do they need right here and now?’

Sometimes it's pulling off bugs or weeds and praying someone else can be a gardener."

Learn to listen, ask the right questions

Hernandez leads three annual unApologetics conferences each year around the state, tailoring his content and information around the hosting churches and the specific obstacles they face in evangelizing their community.



"With Daniel's experience, one of the issues seemed to be that the Christians he had come across relied on bad arguments ... which means nothing to the nonbeliever. They often say, 'I've never met a Christian like you,' which breaks my heart. They've never met someone who has been willing to answer questions and listen," said Hernandez. "This gave him reasons to take Christianity seriously."

Hernandez released a book on the topic, [*The Lazy Approach to Evangelism: A Simple Guide for Conversing With Nonbelievers*](#), in 2023 to help believers hone the art of gospel conversations rather than rely on a scripted format. The key, he said, is to learn how to listen and ask the right questions.

Nieto is continuing to study and follow Hernandez's lead as an apologist, hoping to have the same impact on others.

“I’ve come to the conclusion that Christianity is the only way I’m going to make an impact, spread the truth and try to save the world. Eric says the church is losing the battle right now,” he said.

“I feel like I have a different mission in life, and that’s to go down that philosophical road and keep looking for God.”