

Conversational Apologetics

Apologetics in Manchester, 20th March 2010

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We are living in a time of global shaking. In just the last few months we have seen banks collapse, businesses fail, unemployment increase and turmoil in Parliament, not to mention natural disasters on an unprecedented scale. For many, this is a time of deep and unsettling uncertainty, and that brings with it intense soul-searching. What's life all about? Why is this happening to me? Is there any hope? Where can I place my trust, when everything I know and have relied upon seems to be collapsing all around me?

Answers to these questions, and attacks on the answers offered by Christianity, are coming thick and fast from all sides. Richard Dawkins and other 'new atheists' are shouting loudly that there is [probably] no God (so stop worrying and enjoy your life, as the buses say). Others, such as Dan Brown (author of *The Da Vinci Code* and *Angels and Demons*) are more subtle (albeit slightly) in their approach, preferring instead to attack the integrity of the church or the reliability of the scriptures. Subtler still is the dominant ideology which states that, above all else, tolerance is the virtue of all virtues – so all religions are equally valid and thou shalt not offend anyone by suggesting that some, or worse, one of them, might be True. Accusations that the church (and by association, Christianity) is homophobic or corrupt abound. It seems too that every Christmas and Easter time another documentary or article attacking or 'disproving' the basic tenets of Christianity is produced.

Many people today are left with the impression that Christianity is

- **Irrelevant** – it has nothing to say to me and my life, so why should I bother?
- **Out-dated** – especially on sex and other ethical issues such as abortion
- **Intolerant** – especially as regards homosexuality and other religions
- **Exclusive** – with its claim that Jesus is the only way to God

The writings of the New Atheists (especially Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, Daniel Dennett and Sam Harris) have added the idea that faith is a **delusion**, and that religion – any religion – is a **dangerous** thing governed by **blind, irrational faith** in a God for whom there is as much evidence as a flying spaghetti monster.

It is easy to look at the world around us and all the attacks and uncertainties and accusations about Christianity that abound, and want to retreat – and in fact sadly many Christians do. Like rivers in Winter, we become frozen at the mouth. We don't want to open up to give an answer to our friends' questions. Perhaps we just don't know how to handle them and are afraid of misrepresenting Christ and/or looking a bit foolish. Perhaps too we have never faced our own questions and doubts and therefore we worry there are no answers to be had. But take heart – it has never been easy to be a Christian! (At least they don't tend to throw us to the lions anymore!)

The good news is that there are answers to the deep questions that all of us have and are asked. The amount of discussion about God in the media, plus the fact that many people are asking big questions about life and spiritual matters actually gives us an amazing opportunity to talk about the hope that can be found in Jesus Christ. For us to remain silent gives people the overwhelming impression that Christianity has nothing to say to their lives and situations. We have good news to tell! Are we ready to give an answer for the reason for the hope that we have?

Apologetics

The word 'apologetics' comes from the Greek *απολογία* (apologia) which means 'to give a reasoned defence'. It is in essence communicating why you believe what you believe. It basically involves communicating the Christian message to other people in a way that deals with their objections and questions and presents the Christian faith in a reasoned and well thought through manner.

It is a compassionate branch of Christian theology which seeks to:

- Engage with objections and questions
- Understand and relate to contemporary culture
- Think carefully and critically
- Proclaim Biblical truth – not to be separated from proclamation
- Subvert or deconstruct ideas or worldviews hostile to the gospel

Apologetics is not:

- Complicating or adding clever bits of theology to the gospel to make us look good
- For specialists and trained theologians only – it's for everyone
- Separate from the proclamation of the gospel

Apologetics can be further defined as clearing the roadblocks out of the way so that people can see Christ. It is an evangelistic activity at heart.

Why do apologetics?

- God commands it (1 Peter 3:15)
- Jesus did apologetics
- Paul and Peter did apologetics
- The church fathers were often apologists
- People have questions and objections that prevent them seeing Christ clearly
- We have questions
- We also have answers – the Christian faith is TRUE and we can hold it out to a needy world
- It is a loving way of reaching people
- It is fun and deepens your own faith
- It is incredibly fruitful: many outreach courses such as Alpha are based on apologetics

A Biblical Mandate for Apologetics

"But in your hearts separate Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience." 1 Peter 3:15-16

"...separate Christ as Lord"

- If He's not Lord of all, He's not Lord at all
- 1 Peter is written to a church undergoing severe persecution because of their godly lives
- If we are to engage in apologetics, then the Lordship of Christ needs to be a settled factor in our lives

"In your hearts"

- The term "heart" doesn't just mean the seat of the emotions
- It also means the seat of our thoughts – the mind
- The starting point for apologetics is allowing Christ to be Lord of everything, including your thinking, and thereby being convinced of the truth of the gospel

- This means not being in two minds (re: the book of James)
- We are called to engage with the world around us – not retreat.

“Always be prepared to give an answer”

- This presupposes that someone has asked you a question!
- The church is suffering so much persecution because of **their holiness** – they are living in obedience to God and this is causing people to ask questions about their faith and hope – how can you have such hope when all this is happening to you?
- The gospel often advances when people see the way Christians respond to adverse circumstances
- “Do not repay evil for evil or insult with insult” 1 Pet. 3:9
- When was the last time the way you live caused someone to ask you about your faith?

“Be prepared”

- Challenges to our faith come from all sides and they do not remain constant. Postmodernism, new atheism, scientism, new ageism and a whole host of other isms which influence and sway society can leave us feeling very overwhelmed.
- Fortunately, there is help available!
- So be prepared – and keep fit! Apologetics is a bit like exercise: we can start out very enthusiastically on a new regime but quickly lose heart when we don’t see instant results. Regular apologetics ‘exercise’ is immensely valuable – and once we have attained a level of ‘fitness’, we need to maintain it.

Keep fit - Part 1: Get equipped (in apologetics)

- Books – Alister McGrath, John Lennox, Ravi Zacharias, Amy Orr-Ewing, Michael Green to name but a few
- Listen to talks by apologists
- DVDs
- www.zactrust.org
- www.bethinking.org
- www.damaris.org
- Consider doing some more in-depth training (e.g. The Oxford Centre for Christian Apologetics)
- Discussion groups

Keep fit – Part 2: Be culturally aware

- Media: cinema, news, TV, radio – learn to watch and listen critically and ask yourself what kind of messages about life, God and human beings are being conveyed.
- Look at lists of bestselling books and ask yourself why they should be so popular
- Spend time with non-Christians (THIS IS KEY!!) and ask them what they think about contemporary issues or subjects like coping with disappointment
- Ask yourself the question “Given that this is where my friends are at in terms of their thinking about life, how can I present the gospel to them in a way that will make sense to them?”

“To give an answer to everyone who asks you”

- People are very different!
- Different cultures, ages, backgrounds, influencers all have an effect
- People are also often in very different stages as regards making a commitment to Christ – they might be very near, or completely disinterested
- One of the most important lessons to learn in apologetics is the importance of context.

“...to give the reason for the hope that you have”

- *Faith is blind trust in the absence of evidence, even in the teeth of evidence* (Richard Dawkins)
- Notice that despite what Dawkins et al have to say on the subject, Christianity is a faith which is based on REASON. It has underlying logic and evidence.
- The reason for our hope is the cross of Christ.
- All apologetics must flow to or flow from the cross of Christ
- Earlier I said that apologetics could be defined as removing the roadblocks out of the way so that people can see the cross clearly.
- While the end object is to lead someone to see the cross of Christ and respond, we have to understand that frequently people have legitimate concerns and questions that must be dealt with before they can hear or respond to the message of the cross
- The journey can take some people many years (see C.S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy* for a good example) or it can be the case that once their one sticking point has been dealt with they are ready to make a commitment.

“With gentleness and respect”

- The end object of apologetics is to win someone to Christ
- You can win an argument, but lose the person in the process
- We are not to share the gospel out of an attitude of moral superiority, but in love and humility
- We are trying to recommend Jesus Christ to the person we are talking to

“Keeping a clear conscience”

- Don't bluff – you'll find yourself getting defensive very quickly
- It's OK to say, “I don't know” BUT get into the habit of then saying, “How about we investigate that together?”
- We're not boasting about how great our minds are, but in humility, joy, honesty and the fear of God, we testify to the fact that Jesus is alive.

Confidence

- Our confidence as evangelist/apologists is the same as the confidence we should have anywhere in our Christian lives
- Our confidence is not in a system of thought, a clever argument or a technique
- Our confidence is in the person and works of Jesus Christ
- Paul says, “I know *whom* I have believed” – not ‘*what* I have believed.

Doing Apologetics

A good apologist is aware that apologetics is not about snappy answers to tough questions. More often than not, apologetics is about knowing which questions to ask, even of the questions themselves!

Jesus Christ is a **conversationalist**. So often in the gospels we see him sitting with groups of people, discussing issues which are bothering them (or, in the case of the Pharisees, the issues with which they are attempting to trap him!). Just look at

- Matthew 12:9-14 – picking corn on the Sabbath
- Matthew 19:1-12 – whether divorce is lawful or not
- Mark 2:18 – 3:6 – fasting, the Sabbath, healing
- Mark 3: 22-30 – “How can Satan drive out Satan?”
- Luke 20:1-8 – the authority of Jesus questioned
- Luke 20:20-26 – paying taxes to Caesar
- John 3:1-21 – Jesus and Nicodemus

Often when we read these dialogues, we are surprised by Jesus' response to questions put to him. He seems to evade, or answer a completely different question which didn't seem to be there! He also has a knack of questioning the questioner:

Just one example is Luke 20:1-8:

One day as he was teaching the people in the temple courts and preaching the gospel, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, together with the elders, came up to him. "Tell us by what authority you are doing these things," they said. "Who gave you this authority?"

He replied, "I will also ask you a question. Tell me, John's baptism – was it from heaven, or from men?"

They discussed it among themselves and said, "If we say, 'From heaven', he will ask, 'Why didn't you believe him?' But if we say, 'From men', the people will stone us, because they are persuaded that John was a prophet."

So they answered, "We don't know where it was from."

Jesus said, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things."

What's going on here?

- Jesus Christ, the great...politician???
- Is Jesus playing an evasive game here? Or could we learn a lot more than we think from the way in which Jesus handles difficult questions?
- **Jesus always answers the question behind the question.**

Hesitating to join in

- We sometimes feel hesitant about engaging with people because we don't feel we have all the answers
- If you ever meet the person who does, please introduce me – I have some questions for him myself!
- A good apologist does not only think about answers to be given to other people's questions. It also involves thinking about the questions that need to be raised to other people's answers, or even questions that need to be put to the questions themselves.

Our manner

"(Ravi Zacharias) has helped us think without thinking for us. And he does so with so much grace. I remember an observation made by our mutual friend Kip Jordon. Kip listened to numerous college campus dialogues between Ravi and students. As hostile as such events can become, Kip once told me, "I have never seen Ravi treat one person with disrespect. He always listens patiently, then responds in a manner that honours the one who raised the question."

-Max Lucado, foreword to *Cries of the Heart*

- This does not mean we're to be nice and weak and fluffy and just agree with everyone. We do need to raise a voice for the truth and be bold and courageous.
- **But** we are called to attack ideas and concepts, never people. To take thoughts captive, not individuals. To graciously point towards Christ, not get in His way by our arrogance and pride and know-it-all attitude. The end object of our discussions is to lead the person to Christ.

Ravi says, "You can't offer people a rose when you've cut off their nose."

Some practical tips on keeping your cool

1. Don't bluff – 1 Peter 3 says to keep a clear conscience. If we're bluffing, we are likely to get defensive because we feel insecure in our arguments.
2. Pause and pray
3. Smile! (But not like a shark...)
4. Relax (all things are possible...)

5. Hold your nerve

The Holy Spirit in Q&A

We desperately need the Holy Spirit's help in Q&A.

- To give us insight
- To keep us focused on Christ
- To help us give an answer
- To help us point to Christ
- To work in the questioner's heart and life

How you handle Q&A can be an indicator of where you're at spiritually. Ravi only manages to handle questions with such grace because he stays very close to the Lord.

The question behind the question: one example

Let's say you're having a conversation about what you believe about the criteria for getting into heaven and your friend pipes up, "But God wouldn't send my lovely Granny to Hell!"

What do you do? (Please note, "Oh yes he would!" is probably not the most tactful response here!)

There are two things to consider – the assumptions behind this question and the personal circumstances of the questioner.

Assumptions: my Granny was a good person, good people deserve Heaven, Hell is for bad people (like murderers etc.), God would be unfair and cruel and unjust to condemn someone like her to Hell.

Personal: person may be grieving still, may have had a personal faith that was bruised by the death of their Grandmother, close relationship with Grandmother, fearful of God, distrustful of God, anger at God, personal fear of Hell.

Notice: underlying this statement is a **moral complaint against God**. It is important to realise that underlying so many apologetic questions are moral complaints and accusations against God – accusing him of being unjust, unloving, immoral, unfair – accusing him of breaking his own moral laws, of doing something wrong.

Two more examples:

How can you say abortion is wrong?

Assumptions – this is a question about choice. Christianity is taking away a woman's personal choice and right to decide, therefore it is oppressive to freedom and to women in particular. How dare Christians tell me what to do with my body?

Personal – this person may have had an abortion, or have a friend who has, or know struggling single mothers. She may even be pregnant and considering abortion. Or, if a man, may have close relatives who have had abortions. Or it may be none of the above and simply an issue of freedom of choice that the person feels strongly about.

Didn't God command the killing of children in the Old Testament?

Assumptions – the killing of innocents is wrong and immoral. A God who did this cannot be loving, or trustworthy, or even moral. How can Christians worship a God like this?

Personal – Biblical knowledge by hearsay? Atheist? Read Dawkins or Sam Harris? Thinks you can be good without God? Thinks Christianity or religion in general is outdated or dangerous? Associates religion with terrorism? Just wants to make

Christians squirm? Or perhaps this is a Christian who has come across passages like the slaughter of the Amalekites and is really troubled by them.

So why do we ask questions back?

Questions make people think

“Why do you call me good? Only God is good.”

- If only God is good, and you’re calling Jesus good, then Jesus must be...
- Jesus’ question forces the ruler to think about his own assumptions. This is not a language quibble.

Questions define the issue

Take the abortion question we looked at earlier. The questioner is insisting that it is a woman’s right to choose what happens to her own body.

But the question really is not one of choice, but on how we define life. If a foetus is a life, then there can’t be much argument for legitimately taking it. If it is not a life, then we can reason differently.

Beginning to answer the question of choice without dealing with the issue of defining life will get you into a mess with your hearers, because you’re not getting to the heart of the matter.

Questions expose motives

- Classic example is Jesus’ treatment of those who ask whether it is right to pay taxes to Caesar or not.
- Some people ask questions just to see what you’ll do with them, to trap you, to embarrass you or to have a purely intellectual discussion.

Questions give us more information about where the person is coming from so that we can answer more effectively

Conversations need questions

- Remember Jesus is a conversationalist. If you look at the way he handles discussions in the gospels, you’ll see that they are two-way conversations where the other person is listened to.
- If you meet someone who doesn’t let you get a word in edgeways, it isn’t very pleasant.
- We must listen to what people are actually asking and find out where they’re coming from. We will not find out anything about their motivation for asking the question unless we can ask them some questions.
- We have two ears and one mouth. There’s a reason for that.

An easy way to remember the method

When someone asks you a question, try to get into the habit of, in the back of your mind, thinking “Why, What, How”:

WHY is the person asking this question?

WHAT question can I ask?

HOW might I begin to give an answer?