

Apologetics and Evangelism

Probe's founder Jimmy Williams, a master in classical apologetics, explores the use of apologetics in sharing the gospel.

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Today as never before, Christians are being called upon to give reasons for the hope that is within them. Often in the evangelistic context seekers raise questions about the validity of the gospel message. Removing intellectual objections will not make one a Christian; a change of heart wrought by the Spirit is also necessary. But though intellectual activity is insufficient to bring another to Christ, it does not follow that it is also unnecessary. In this essay we will examine the place and purpose of apologetics in the sharing of our faith with others.

The word “apologetics” never actually appears in the Bible. But there is a verse which contains its meaning:

But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts, and be ready always to give *an answer* to every man who asketh you the reason for the hope that is within you with meekness and fear (1 Peter 3:15).

The Greek word *apologia* means “answer,” or “reasonable defense.” It does not mean to apologize, nor does it mean just to engage in intellectual dialogue. It means to provide reasonable answers to honest questions and to do it with humility, respect, and reverence.

The verse thus suggests that the *manner* in which one does apologetics is as important as the words expressed. And Peter tells us in this passage that Christians are to be ready *always* with answers for those who inquire of us concerning our faith. Most Christians have a great deal of study ahead of

them before this verse will be a practical reality in their evangelistic efforts.

Another question that often comes up in a discussion about the merits and place of apologetics is, "What is the relationship of the mind to evangelism?" "Does the mind play any part in the process?" "What about the effects of the fall?" "Isn't man dead in trespasses and sins?" "Doesn't the Bible say we are to know nothing among men except Jesus Christ and Him crucified?" "Why do we have to get involved at all in apologetics if the Spirit is the One Who actually brings about the New Birth?"

I think you will agree that today there are many Christians who are firmly convinced that answering the intellectual questions of unbelievers is an ineffectual waste of time. They feel that any involvement of the mind in the gospel interchange smacks too much of human effort and really just dilutes the Spirit's work.

But Christianity thrives on intelligence, not ignorance. If a real Reformation is to accompany the revival for which many of us pray, it must be something of the mind as well as the heart. It was Jesus who said, "Come and see." He invites our scrutiny and investigation both before and after conversion.

We are to love God with the *mind* as well as the heart and the soul. In fact, the early church was powerful and successful because it out-thought and out-loved the ancient world. We are not doing either very well today.

Reasoning and Persuading

Most Christians today seem to prefer experiencing Christianity to thinking about or explaining it. But consider these verses:

Matthew 13:23: "But he who received the seed on the good ground is he who hears the word and *understands* it, who indeed bears fruit." They all heard it, but only the "good soil" *comprehended* it.

Acts 8:30: "When the Spirit prompted Philip to join himself to the chariot of the Ethiopian eunuch (who was reading Isaiah 53), he asked, 'Do you *understand* what you are reading?' The eunuch replied, 'How can I except some man should *guide* me?'"

Acts 18:4: Paul at Corinth was "reasoning in the synagogue every sabbath and trying to *persuade* the Jews and Greeks."

Acts 19:8: Paul at Ephesus "entered the synagogue and continued speaking out boldly for three months, *reasoning* and *persuading* them about the kingdom of God."

Romans 10:17: "So then faith comes by *hearing* and *hearing* by the word of God." Again the emphasis is on hearing with perception.

2 Corinthians 5:11: "We *persuade* men," says Paul. Vine's *Expository Dictionary* describes this Greek word like this: "to apply persuasion, to prevail upon or win over, bringing about a change of mind by the influence of reason or moral considerations."

All of these words—persuasion, dialogue, discourse, dispute, argue, present evidence, reason with—are vehicles of communication and are at the heart of Paul's classical evangelistic model. Can there be saving faith without understanding? Can there be understanding without reasoning? The Bible would appear to say no. Paul urges believers in 2 Timothy 2:15 to study to show ourselves approved unto God, workmen that need not to be ashamed.

J. Gresham Machen, a great Christian scholar, said the following words in 1912 to a group of young men at Princeton Seminary:

It would be a great mistake to suppose that all men are equally well-prepared to receive the gospel. It is true that the decisive thing is the regenerative power in connection with certain prior conditions for the reception of the

Gospel. . . . I do not mean that the removal of intellectual objections will make a man a Christian. No conversion was ever wrought by argument. A change of heart is also necessary . . . but because the intellectual labor is insufficient, it does not follow that it is unnecessary. God may, it is true, overcome all intellectual obstacles by an immediate exercise of His regenerative power. Sometimes He does. But He does so very seldom. Usually He exerts His power in connections with certain conditions of the human mind. Usually He does not bring into the kingdom, entirely without preparation, those whose mind and fancy are completely contaminated by ideas which make the acceptance of the Gospel logically impossible.

If these words were true in 1912, how much more are they needed today?

Individual Responses

People respond to the gospel for various reasons—some out of pain or a crisis, others out of some emotional need such as loneliness, guilt, insecurity, etc. Some do so out of a fear of divine judgment. And coming to know Christ brings a process of healing and hope to the human experience. To know Christ is to find comfort for pain, acceptance for insecurity and low self-esteem, forgiveness for sin and guilt.

And others seem to have *intellectual* questions which block their openness to accept the credibility of the Christian message. These finally find in Christ the answers to their intellectual doubts and questions.

Those today who are actively involved in evangelism readily recognize the need for this kind of information to witness to certain people, and there are many more doubters and skeptics out there today than there were even twenty years ago.

We can see more clearly where we are as a culture by taking a

good look at Paul's world in the first century. Christianity's early beginnings flourished in a Graeco-Roman culture more X-rated and brutal than our own. And we find Paul *adapting* his approach from group to group.

For instance, he expected certain things to be in place when he approached the Jewish communities and synagogues from town to town. He knew he would find a group which already had certain beliefs which were not in contradiction to the gospel he preached. They were monotheists. They believed in one God. They also believed this God had spoken to them in their Scriptures and had given them absolute moral guidelines for behavior (the Ten Commandments).

But when Paul went to the Gentile community, he had no such expectations. There he knew he would be faced with a culture that was polytheistic (many gods), biblically ignorant, and living all kinds of perverted, wicked lifestyles. And on Mars Hill in Athens when he preached the gospel, he did somewhat modify his approach.

He spoke of God more in terms of His presence and power, and he even quoted truth from a Greek poet in order to connect with these "pagans" and get his point across: "We are God's offspring" (Acts 17:28).

One hundred years ago, the vast majority of Americans pretty much reflected the Jewish mentality, believing in God, having a basic respect for the Bible, and strong convictions about what was right and what was wrong.

That kind of American can still be found today in the 90s, but George Gallup says they aren't having much of an impact on the pagan, or Gentile community, which today holds few beliefs compatible with historic Christianity.

To evangelize such people, we have our work cut out for us. And we will have to use both our minds and our hearts to "become all things to all men in order to save some."

A Variety of Approaches

As we're considering how we as Christians can have an impact on our increasingly fragmented society, we need to keep in mind that many do not share our Christian view of the world, and some are openly hostile to it.

In fact, a college professor recently commented that he felt the greatest impediment to social progress right now was what he called the bigoted, dogmatic Christian community. That's you and me, folks.

If we could just "loosen up a little," and compromise on some issues, America would be a happier place. What is meant by this is not just a demand for tolerance . . . but wholesale acceptance of *any* person's lifestyle and personal choices!

But the Bible calls us to be "salt and light" in our world. How can we be that effectively? I don't have a total answer, but I'll tell you after 30+ years of active ministry what isn't working. And by my observation, far too many Christians are trying to address the horrendous issues of our day with one of three very ineffective approaches.

Defensive Approach – Many Christians out there are mainly asking the question, "How strong are our defenses?" "How high are our walls?" This barricade mentality has produced much of the Christian subculture. We have our own language, literature, heroes, music, customs, and educational systems. Of course, we need places of support and fellowship. But when Paul describes spiritual warfare in 2 Corinthians 10, he actually *reverses* the picture. It is the *enemy* who is behind walls, inside strongholds of error and evil. And Paul depicts the Christians as those who should be mounting offensives at these walls to tear down the high things which have exalted themselves above the knowledge of God. We are to be *taking* ground, not just holding it.

Defeatist Approach – Other Christians have already given up. Things are so bad, they say, that my puny efforts won't change anything. "After all, we are living in the last days, and Jesus said that things would just get worse and worse." This may be true, but it may not be. Jesus said no man knows the day or the hour of His coming. Martin Luther had the right idea when he said, "If Jesus were to come tomorrow, I'd plant a tree today and pay my debts." The Lord may well be near, He could also tarry awhile. Since we don't know for sure, we should be seeking to prepare ourselves and our children to live for Him in the microchip world of the 21st century.

Devotional Approach – Other Christians are trying to say something about their faith, but sadly, they can only share their personal religious experience. It is true that Paul speaks of us as "epistles known and read" by all men. Our life/experience with Christ is a valid witness. But there are others out there in the culture with "changed" lives . . . and Jesus didn't do the changing! Evangelism today must be something more than "swapping" experiences. We must learn how to ground our faith in the facts of history and the claims of Christ. We must have others grapple with Jesus Christ, not just our experience.

Apologetics and Evangelism

I want to conclude this essay with some very important principles to keep in mind if we want to be effective in seeing others come to know Christ through our individual witness.

1. Go to people. The heart of evangelism is Christians taking the initiative to actually go out and "fish for men." Acts 17:17 describes for us how Paul was effective in his day and time: "Therefore he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and with the gentile worshippers, and in the marketplace daily with those who happened to be there."

2. Communicate with people. Engage them. Sharing the Gospel involves communication. People must be focused upon and then understand the Gospel to respond to it. It is our responsibility as Christians to make it as clear as possible for all who will listen. "Knowing, therefore, the terror of the Lord, we persuade men" (2 Cor. 5:11).

3. Relate to people. Effective witness involves not only the transmission of biblical information; it also includes establishing a relationship with the other person. Hearts, as well as heads, must meet. "So, affectionately longing for you," said Paul to the Thessalonians, "we were well pleased to import to you not only the good news of God, but also our own lives, because you have become dear to us" (1 Thess. 2:8).

4. Remove barriers. Part of our responsibility involves having the skills to eliminate obstacles, real or imagined, which keep an individual from taking the Christian message seriously. When God sent the prophet Jeremiah forth, He said, "Behold, I have put my words in your mouth . . . and I have ordained you to pluck up and to break down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant." Sometimes our task as well is one of "spiritual demolition," of removing the false so the seeds of truth can take root. Apologetics sometimes serves in that capacity, of preparing a highway for God in someone's life.

5. Explain the gospel to others. We need an *army* of Christians today who can consistently and clearly present the message to as many people as possible. Luke says of Lydia, "The Lord opened her heart so that she heeded the things which were spoken by Paul" (Acts 16:14). Four essential elements in sharing the gospel:

- someone talking (Paul)
- things spoken (gospel)
- someone listening (Lydia)
- the Lord opening the heart.

6. Invite others to receive Christ. We can be clear of presentation, but ineffective because we fail to give someone the opportunity and encouragement to take that first major step of faith. "Therefore we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were pleading through us: we beg you in Christ's behalf, be reconciled to God" (2 Cor. 5:20).

7. Make every effort by every means to establish them in the faith. Stay with them, ground them in the Scripture, help them gain assurance of their salvation, and get them active in a vital fellowship/church.

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