

Men of His Word Conference

February 11, 2017

Christian Apologetics in a Non-Christian World

Always be prepared to give an answer (apologia = defense) to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect (1 Pt 3:15) (NIV84).

Truth in Love

Traditional Christian apologetics is rooted in rational thought. It is a theological discipline that presents historical, reasoned, and evidential bases for Christianity and defending it against objections.

But is traditional Christian apologetics the best approach when engaging people who think the following about Christians?

“One outsider put it this way: ‘Most people I meet assume that *Christian* means very conservative, entrenched in their thinking, anti-gay, anti-choice, angry, violent, illogical, empire builders; they want to convert everyone, and they generally cannot live peacefully with anyone who doesn’t believe what they believe’” (Kinnaman and Lyons 2007, 26).

In speaking of Christians, “the most common points of skepticism and objections raised by outsiders . . . are as follows:

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|------------------------------------|------------------|
| 1) Hypocritical | 4) Sheltered |
| 2) Too focused on getting converts | 5) Too political |
| 3) Anti-homosexual | 6) Judgmental” |

(Kinnaman and Lyons 2007, 29-30).

Q: Thinking objectively about Christians you know, are they more about . . .

- Delivering bad news . . . or proclaiming the Good News?
- Emphasizing what they are against . . . or sharing what God is for?
- Handing out guilt . . . or dispensing grace?

Jesus' ministry was all about dispensing grace. His encounter with the Samaritan woman (**John 4**) is a great example. Jesus engaged this woman in conversation and treated her with love and respect.

“The issue is not whether I agree with someone but rather how I treat someone with whom I profoundly disagree. We Christians are called to use the ‘weapons of grace,’ which means treating even our opponents with love and respect. As usual, Jesus shows the way” (Yancey 2016, 26).

A key to Christian apologetics in a non-Christian world is **speaking the truth in love**. St. Paul wrote:

Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ (Eph 4:14-15).

When we speak the truth in love, not only do others benefit, but we **grow up into Christ**, becoming more like him in our thoughts, words, and actions.

And, what is the best way to determine whether I am **speaking the truth in love**?

**The question to ask yourself is not:
“Am I speaking the truth in love?”**

**The question is:
“Is the person with whom I’m speaking, experiencing my love?”**

Identity

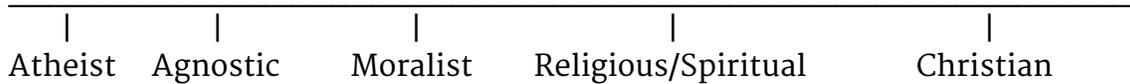
Identity is who you are at your core. It doesn't change if you are at home or work, with one group of people or another. Identity permeates everything about you.

Some characteristics that exist within every person's identity are doubt and skepticism. It doesn't matter if we are Christian or non-Christian. To one degree or another, we are all skeptics. We all have doubts.

“Believers should acknowledge and wrestle with doubts. . . . It is no longer sufficient to hold beliefs just because you inherited them. Only if you struggle long and hard with objections to your faith will you be able to provide grounds for your beliefs to skeptics, including yourself, that are plausible rather than ridiculous or offensive. And just as important for our current situation, such a process will lead you, even after you come to a position of strong faith, to respect and understand those who doubt” (Keller 2008, xviii).

Q: When it comes to your Christian beliefs, what do you have doubts about?

Spiritual skeptics exist on a spectrum



Knowing where you are at on the spectrum is important.

Knowing where the person with whom you are engaged in conversation is at on the spectrum is essential.

Q: What do you have in common with atheists, agnostics, and religious non-Christians?

“If you believe in Jesus’ message, you believe in a truth, but not a truth that leads to exclusion. . . . The real issue is, then, which kind of truth—and which kind of identity that the truth produces—leads you to embrace people who are deeply different from you?”

If I build my identity on what Jesus Christ did for me and the fact that I have an everlasting name in him by grace, I can’t, on the one hand, feel superior to anybody, nor do I have to fear anybody else. I don’t have to compare myself with them at all. My identity is based on somebody who was excluded for me, who was cast out for me, who loved his enemies” (Keller 2016, 151).

Q: Who am I? “I am _____.”

Engaging Skeptics

The rejection of absolute truth necessitates a change in approach.

Examples of attitudes regarding absolute truth:

- “All truth is relative. No one has the truth.”
- “That’s true for you, but not for me.”
- “Truth is relative to one’s culture.”

Unless the skeptic you’ve engaged in conversation shares your belief that the Bible is the inspired and inerrant Word of God, you need a different approach.

A story about Mike, a traveling companion to Tulum . . .

- What will heaven be like? Are we just going to be sitting in church all the time? Right now, I can hardly make it for an hour.
- Don’t religious leaders just tell people what they want to hear because they need their money?
- Why are so many Christian churches in decline?
- If God is God, can’t he do whatever he wants, including who gets to heaven?

And his key question:

- *Will only people who believe in Jesus be in heaven?*

Q: **Which of the following four approaches would most closely align with how you would have answered Mike’s question?**

_____ I believe that only people who believe in Jesus as their Savior will be in heaven.

_____ The Bible says that Jesus is “the way and the truth and the life and that no one comes to the Father except through him.” So, yes, only people who believe in Jesus as their Savior will be heaven.

_____ Jesus claimed: “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” If the Bible is true, then only those who believe in Jesus as their Savior will be in heaven.

_____ I don’t know. Only God knows.

Genuine humility trumps intellectual supremacy

Role-play—no matter what I say, you say:

I love you man and I respect you!

A three-question approach to engaging a skeptic

1. What do you believe?
2. Why do you believe that?
3. How does what you believe affect or impact your life?

“To the degree we live out the message we say we believe, treating everyone with dignity and worth and measure success by the standards of Jesus and not the broader culture, to that degree only we will succeed in serving up good news to a thirsty world” (Yancey 2016, 215).

Showing Truth and Love

To the poor and oppressed

Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow (Isaiah 1:17).

If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth (1 John 3:17-18).

“. . . we can conclude that a professed Christian who is not committed to a life of generosity and justice toward the poor and marginalized is, at the very least, a living contradiction of the Gospel of Christ, the Son of God, whose Father ‘executes justice for the oppressed, who gives food to the hungry’ (Psalm 146:7)” (Keller 2016, 210).

In the early church

All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had. With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord

Jesus, and much grace was upon them all. There were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone as he had need (Acts 4:32-35).

- Rescuing the unwanted—Roman infanticide
- Caring for the sick—Carthage plague
- Helping the poor—Julian's scourge

“Ted used to be the sound man for the Grateful Dead. He had never gone to church and had no interest in God. His sister, a Christian who lives in a different state, begged him to check out our church. One day, he finally showed up.

Eventually, he volunteered to help run sound. At our pre-service production meeting, he announced to everyone that he didn't believe anything our church taught. I asked why he continued to attend. He got choked up and said, 'I've never felt loved like this before.'

Ted continued coming to our church, and four months later, he accepted our truth. Actually, he accepted Jesus, who is the Truth. As I write this, it's 10 months after Ted first showed up, and he is currently overseas on a mission trip where he is loving people, hoping they'll come to know the truth that can set them free” (Antonucci 2015, 3).

Escaping the Bubble

“As we are surrounded by Muslims, atheists, agnostics, and adherents of many other religions and worldviews, the only advice many in Christian media seem to give Christians is about their spiritual life: about how they should walk with Jesus, or how they should have quiet time and read their Bibles, how they can better manage their churches or improve their marriages.

We prefer our Christian bubble—our little subculture where we all speak each other's spiritual language” (de Keijzer 2016, 2).

Characteristics of being in the Christian bubble

- Content—being around people who have the same truth
- Comfortable—experience few serious challenges to our truth
- Exclusive—use our own vocabulary and acronyms that no one else knows
- Smug—we have the truth; nothing we believe could ever be wrong
- Elitist—“our church has the Word of God in its truth and purity”

Finding our way back to engage the spiritual skeptics

“For starters, this is not to be found in a return to a Christian bubble where we all tell each other how right we are. It is easy to agree with those in your own group especially when it is done by telling everybody how bad those on the outside are and how necessary it is to stand together in a world that is increasingly losing its bearings.

We may feel happy to be among each other, but the world is lost to us so we are lost to the world. Before we know it, we’ve become an obscure subculture that has lost its bearing with society. Soon we are left without impact or relevance” (de Keijzer 2016, 2).

Sam, a second traveling companion to Tulum and back

- “The gap between the Christian church and the American culture gets wider every time I return to the United States.”
- “What the church needs more of is grace.”
- A personal example . . .

“My niece, a beautiful and gifted young lady, finally, after many years of avoiding church due to spiritual traumas inflicted by a congregation more enamored with law than love, agreed to join us for a Sunday worship.

Afterwards, an elderly lady walked up to her and stated, ‘I just have to tell you your tattoos offend me.’ My niece blinked and gave an ashen-faced smile. She had trusted us. She had believed our heart and probably was aching to believe God’s heart for her, too. But law came in, struck from the shadows, and injected its righteous venom. Religious propriety snatched away the little grace our niece had embraced, and the lady walked away happy in her self-righteousness, contented, having done God’s work for him. And Jesus wept” (Walker 2015, 105f).

Takeaways

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Resources

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