



I'm Smart, but I'm No C.S. Lewis: *How Can I Intelligently Discuss My Faith with Others?*

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Imagine that if you are reading this article you're pretty smart. God has given you a good mind. You may have done well in school, or you may be blessed with good common sense and the street smarts to excel in the modern world. And yet when you compare yourself to bright followers of Jesus, such as C.S. Lewis, Ravi Zacharias, or Tim Keller, you don't feel all that competent when it comes to talking knowledgeably about your faith in Jesus around smart nonbelievers. I can relate. I consider myself intelligent, but when it comes to thinking quickly on my feet to respond to people's questions or statements about religion, I often flounder. (And I even went to seminary!) I'm like those politicians who can sound and look great when they have Teleprompters in front of them to help deliver prepared and rehearsed remarks. But if they have to go off script—look out! You just never know what's going to come out of their mouths, and usually it doesn't come off sounding all that erudite. In fact, to use a bad "S" word that my daughters tell me I shouldn't say, it sounds stupid. And I must admit, I don't like to feel or look stupid, especially in front of my bright friends.

If you are like me, this may give you some consolation: you and I are in the majority. Not very many followers of Christ have the unusual gift of Evangelism with a capital "E" or the gift of Apologetics with a capital "A." And yet I want you to know that there is hope for us. Believe it or not, God can still use us in amazing ways to help others get closer to being reconciled with the Creator of the universe. In fact, even though we may not have the gift of Evangelism or Apologetics, God has given us a very important role and calls us to be actively involved in evangelism and apologetics. Relatively few are called to be evangelists, but everyone is called to be a witness (Acts 1:8) and make disciples (Matt. 28:18–20).

The Great Commission in Matthew 28:18–20 is given to all disciples of Jesus. None of us is exempt from the com-

mand to go into all the world and to make disciples, teaching them to obey all that Jesus commanded. This isn't optional for the follower of Christ. And as Peter puts it so well, you and I should "Have no fear of them [non-Christians] . . . always being prepared to make a defense [*apologia*] to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect" (1 Pet. 3:14–15 ESV). These two scriptural passages make it clear that you and I are to be involved in evangelism and apologetics. This is to be a part of the normative life of a believer.

One of the best definitions of evangelism I ever heard was that it's one beggar showing another beggar where to find bread. If Jesus, the Bread of Life, has saved you and me from spiritual starvation and death, it seems only natural that we should share this good news with others. And apologetics can be simply defined as giving a reasonable explanation or defense of our faith in Jesus. We shouldn't feel sorry or ashamed to believe what we do; rather, if we take time to learn about our beliefs, we'll discover that the wisest Being in the universe, God, has given us logical, thoughtful reasons for putting our trust in Him. While faith is involved in trusting Jesus, it isn't a blind faith with no rationale or thinking behind it.

I'm not saying that doing evangelism and apologetics is going to be easy. Peter goes on to say that when you are giving a defense for our faith, you are to have "a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame. For it is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God's will, than for doing evil" (1 Pet. 3:16–17). In other words, while we hope and expect that God will work in people's hearts



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and that some people become part of the Lord's family through our words and testimony, others will react negatively to our convictions and belief in Jesus.

The good news is that Jesus promised to provide us with the most powerful help available on the planet, the gift of the Holy Spirit. Jesus says, "But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you" (John 14:26 ESV). So, if we can leave the conversion part in the hands of the Holy Spirit, live rightly, listen to others, and speak truthfully in love, we can live with the responses to our witness for Christ whether positive or negative.

There is some debate in theological circles as to the difference between apologetics and evangelism, some stating that apologetics is pre-evangelism—the tearing down of barriers to faith and belief—that makes possible evangelism, the sharing of the gospel message. Others will say that apologetics is one aspect of evangelism. Personally and practically, I don't think it matters. The key is that we are taking the daily steps in our life to be faithful to the call that God has given to each of His disciples to give reasons for our faith and to tell others that they too can be saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ.

Fortunately I've discovered that the Lord has raised up some winsome and clever brothers and sisters in Christ who have thought deeply about how we can better serve as evangelists and apologists. stalwarts such as Randy Newman, Gregory Koukl, Lee Strobel, Alister McGrath, Ravi Zacharias, Michael Ramsden, Amy Orr-Ewing, Art Lindsley, and, yes, even old C.S. Lewis have something to contribute to this arena in today's changing world. These gifted apologists and evangelists have written books and produced videos and audio recordings that make this endeavor more accessible to people like you and me. They have developed tactics, strategies, and tools that can assist those of us who would like to better defend and share our faith as commanded by Jesus. As I've tried to learn from these gifted Apologists and Evangelists, several introductory lessons stand out to me.

First of all, apologetics and evangelism are contact sports—played out on the field of relational life. We have to rub shoulders with nonbelievers in order to be effective. Just listening to lectures on your i-pod, or reading books and becoming fat and happy on knowledge about how to prove the Christian faith is not going to have any effect on the world around us. We need to find ways to implement and share the truths that we have been given. We can't be content with staying in our Christian bubble and never dialoguing with others. Once we're off the bench and applying what we've learned about apologetics and evangelism in our relationships at work, home, church, and at the grocery store, there is a good chance that we may get bumped around. At the same time, as we begin to actively engage with people about our faith, we will also become aware of

the Holy Spirit working in and around our personal sphere of influence. This will encourage us and inspire us to continue the practice of apologetics and evangelism.

Second, I encourage you to thank God for the great minds of the Christian faith from the past and the present. Prior to the Enlightenment in the 1700s, it was assumed that most of the brightest intellects were followers of Christ. After all, Western Civilization was founded on Judeo-Christian principles that provided the framework for scientific and philosophic discovery. With the understanding that God had created the world and then given mankind the command to "multiply and subdue the earth" came the implication that we were to discover through natural revelation more about God's creation. God-fearing intelligent men and women promoted the mind and ways to use it for the benefit of society, setting up universities, hospitals, libraries, and scientific discoveries that we take for granted today. These positive aspects of culture didn't develop in other parts of the world where religious worldviews didn't promote such humanitarianism progress.

Sadly, within the past couple of centuries, many within the academic world have belittled the Judeo-Christian worldview and belief in Jesus as antiquated or anti-intellectual. How far this is from the truth! Throughout history God has given the church great minds such as Augustine, John Calvin, Martin Luther, Blaise Pascal, Sir Isaac Newton, Jonathan Edwards, G.K. Chesterton, Dorothy Sayers, and C.S. Lewis, and today people like Francis Collins, Tim Keller, and Ravi Zacharias who have presented the logic and rationale of the Christian faith through their words and actions in ways that have helped their contemporaries and future generations grasp the beauty, goodness, and truth of Jesus Christ and the gospel message. They have defended the faith well and given solid reasons for putting one's trust in Jesus.

Just knowing that some of the greatest minds ever have developed good reasons for belief in God should bolster our confidence in the truth and reasonableness of our faith. A 2009 survey conducted by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press shows that 51 percent of scientists believe in God or some kind of higher power.¹ Don't let people fool you into thinking that there are no bright followers of Jesus or that our faith is irrational. Instead, take time to read, listen, and fill your mind with the true, beautiful, and solid arguments, provided by bright Apologists from the past and present, that can help ground your faith in Jesus.

Third, don't compare yourself to C.S. Lewis, Ravi Zacharias, or Josh McDowell. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 12:4–6 (NIV), "There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit distributes them. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but in all of them and in everyone it is the same God at work." In other words, God has given these great Apologists and Evangelists a gift, but He has also given you a gift or gifts to use in service to the kingdom. He has also given you the

empowering presence of His Spirit. You are called to be the very best evangelist or apologist you can be within your natural spheres of influence: family, friends, neighbors, and coworkers. And you are to use the gifts that God has given to you, whether hospitality, teaching, service, etc., in the various conversations and opportunities that come your way to share and defend your faith in Him. As you pray for occasions to share your faith in Christ and the gospel message, He will answer that prayer, for it is in the center of His will.

Fourth, and very important, you don't have to have the answers to every question. Dr. J. Christy Wilson, a mentor and seminary professor of mine, used to tell students, "It's all right to say, 'I don't know the answer to that question. Let me do some research and get back to you.' Then you can follow up later and carry on the conversation. The next time someone asks you that same question, you will have an answer." Remember that Jesus asks His followers to be humble. Being able to say, "I don't have all the answers, but I'll sure try to find out for you," helps us develop humility and also creates trust with those with whom we're speaking. Far from turning people off, this will increase their respect for you. One reason people don't trust politicians is that they make up answers to appease the crowd rather than being transparent and admitting that they don't have it all figured out. We must take care that we not fall into the same snare and lose our credibility.

Fifth, when engaged in conversation, listen and ask questions first, before giving the top ten reasons why God exists. Randy Newman, in his book *Questioning Evangelism*, notes that Jesus often asked people questions and more often than not answered their questions with a question of His own. It was the rabbinic way of teaching and one that helped lower levels of hostility and open people's minds to think about things in a new way.² Michael Ramsden, in his article "Conversational Apologetics," states that questions get people to think, expose contradictions, define the issue, and reformulate the real underlying issue.³ In other words, your questions can help others understand their own thinking patterns; this can lead to the self-discovery that they've been mistaken in their rationale. Your impact may be stronger when you allow people to come to a conclusion on their own without your preaching to or nagging them.

Sixth, pray and trust God to use you as a witness as you rely on the Holy Spirit's power to guide you. Too often we trip over our own feet in conversations because we're trying to prove our point or win the person over without seeking the Holy Spirit's help. After all, it is not we but the Holy Spirit who has the power to convict and persuade the heart and mind. If we can remember to pray without ceasing—as we're walking down the hall to the water cooler, as we begin an interesting conversation with someone—we'll be much better off. As we pray silently for the other person, that the Lord would be stirring her heart, we become other

focused, sensitive to the prompting of the Spirit, and better able to listen and pay attention to presenting needs. This enables us to be ready to give a reason for our faith when the opportunity arises naturally in conversation rather than forcing something when the person isn't ready to hear it. When the Spirit does give us opportunities, we can trust Him to bring to our mind anything we need from the Bible or another reputable resource we have studied.

Seventh, take risks for God. As I mentioned earlier, being a witness of Christ and using apologetics is a contact sport. In other words, there is always potential that we might get hit or hurt in some way. On the other hand, if you sit on the bench and never engage in conversations with others about your faith, you'll do even greater harm to yourself and especially do greater harm to those around you. Your apathy and lack of concern for their spiritual well-being will prevent them from considering God's truth about eternal life. After all, every other worldview is bombarding them incessantly. Why shouldn't they at least be exposed from time to time to the truth of God through your words and actions? If you really love the people in your sphere of influence, you'll need to take some risks. The good news is that the same God who helped David slay the giant Goliath is walking with you. The risks of personal insult and slander are well worth the greater reward of possibly seeing someone move closer to a relationship with Jesus.

Eighth, don't feel that you have to hit a home run every time you come up to bat. In other words, you're not a failure if you don't lead someone in a prayer of salvation when you talk about Jesus. Gregory Koukl, in his book *Tactics*, makes the point that if you just "put a stone in someone's shoe"⁴ and make that person a little bit uncomfortable with his faulty worldview, you will be helping him become more open down the road to the truth of Jesus. We must realize that not everyone is at the same point in his spiritual journey. Stephen Smallman, in his book *Spiritual Birthline*, makes the point that all of us who have been found by Christ have a unique spiritual birthline, a story or journey that has included many small steps that eventually led to our conversion.⁵

If you sense that someone is ready to take a step of faith and put her trust in Jesus, then by all means take the risk and ask her if she'd like to accept Jesus as her Lord and Savior right now. On the other hand, if the person is a hardened atheist and just needs to realize that there are bright scientists, philosophers and thinkers who are followers of Christ, that she has been prejudiced in her thinking, then it's probably not the time to lead that person in the sinner's prayer.

Ninth, take some time to study apologetics and learn some strategies, tactics, and ways of presenting the gospel that will enable you to be an effective witness and apologist when opportunities arise. There are many good books and resources available including a new resource developed

by the C.S. Lewis Institute. We have sought to take some of these best practices in apologetics and evangelism and present them in what we are calling our Conversational Apologetics Course. This course can be used by churches, small groups, campus ministries, and other Christian organizations to train people like you and me to be effective witnesses for Christ. This small-group resource provides tools that help participants communicate the gospel in contemporary life, while relying on the Holy Spirit to take care of the results. This course is meant to be experiential and interactive rather than focusing on the reception of information. It provides opportunities for practicing conversational apologetics so participants can become more confident and comfortable discussing their faith in Jesus. If you're interested in checking out this new C.S. Lewis Institute resource, go to our website at: www.cslewisinstitute.org.

One simple strategy used in the course is keeping a Conversational Apologetics Notebook. This is also a part of our year-long discipleship Fellows Program. Here's how it works: take a notebook and divide it into four sections:

Section 1: Everyday Questions and Statements about God and Faith: Start listening to and observing everyday conversations and keep a list of questions you hear people asking, or that you yourself may be asking, about God. Write down the different statements that people make about faith and God. If you can, note the exact wording of the questions and statements. You may need to keep a piece of scratch paper with you throughout the day, or make a note on your smart phone of what you hear. Then record it in your Apologetics Notebook.

Section 2: Categorize Questions and Statements: In time, you'll probably note ten to twelve basic questions and related ideas that people normally ask. Organize the questions and statements you've collected in Section 1 into categories of similar themes.

Section 3: Seek out Good Answers to the Questions and Statements: At the top of a page write out an apologetics question. Read a good article, chapter from a book, listen to an audio recording, or watch a video that addresses the question. Using an outline format, write a one-page summary that offers an answer to that particular question. Do this for each of the ten to twelve primary apologetics questions you've identified.

Section 4: Strategies and Tactics: Read books such as Randy Newman's *Questioning Evangelism* or Gregory Koukl's *Tactics* and write down questions, strategies, and tactics that can help you become more effective as you engage in discussions about your faith.

You and I may not be C.S. Lewis, but God has uniquely gifted us and given us the ability to learn from the good resources available in the area of apologetics and evangelism. You might be surprised to know that even C.S. Lewis felt some fear and trepidation when considering the task of evangelism and apologetics. In a letter to his friend Sheldon Vanauken, Lewis wrote,

My feeling about people in whose conversion I have been allowed to play a part is always mixed with awe and even fear: such as a boy might feel on first being allowed to fire a rifle. The disproportion between his puny finger on the trigger and the thunder and lightning which follow is alarming. And the seriousness with which the other party takes my words always raises the doubt whether I have taken them seriously enough myself.⁶

You and I and C.S. Lewis are not all that different after all. As Lewis expressed it to the young convert, Vanauken, "Think of me as a fellow-patient in the same hospital who, having been admitted a little earlier, could give some advice."⁷

Notes:

1. Pew Research Religion and Public Life Project, "Scientists and Belief," November 5, 2009, <http://www.pewforum.org/2009/11/05/scientists-and-belief/>.
2. Randy Newman, *Questioning Evangelism: Engaging People's Hearts the Way Jesus Did* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2004).
3. Michael Ramsden, "Conversational Apologetics," in *Knowing and Doing*, Summer 2002.
4. Gregory Koukl, *Tactics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 38.
5. Stephen Smallman, *Spiritual Birthline* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006).
6. C.S. Lewis, "A Letter to Sheldon Vanauken" (April 22, 1953), in Sheldon Vanauken, *A Severe Mercy* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1987), 134.
7. Ibid.

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Discipleship of Heart and Mind

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