

## Conversational Apologetics

by Michael Ramsden, Founder, The Oxford Centre for Christian Apologetics

The trouble with most theologians," said one writer, "is that they go down deeper, stay down longer and come up murkier than anyone else I know." Maybe, as you read this, that sentiment expresses your own feelings about apologetics. However, apologetics is not about injecting a dose of confusion into the Christian Gospel to try and make it sound more profound. It is about communicating the profundity of the Gospel so that it removes the confusion surrounding it.



Michael Ramsden

Apologetics is really about evangelism. The word apologetics comes from the Greek word *apologia*, which literally means a reasoned defense. The apostle Paul uses the word to describe his own ministry, when in Philippians he states that he is appointed for the defense and confirmation of the Gospel. We also find *apologia* used in 1 Peter, when a command is given that we should always be prepared to give an answer (*apologia*) for the reason for the hope that we have. Clearly, both Peter and Paul are thinking of evangelism in these contexts.

Unfortunately, however, apologetics has come to be defined in such a way that to most people it means little more than engaging in abstract philosophical arguments, divorced from the reality of life. Yet apologetics is not about dry intellectualization of the Gospel. For others, the word seems to imply apologizing, as if Christians should say they were sorry for believing in Christ. Yet apologetics is not about that either.

### *The Truth About Apologetics*

So what do we mean when we talk about apologetics? The letter of 1 Peter is addressed to the wider church, which is suffering under persecution. The letter is a passionate one. Its readers are exhorted to lead holy and obedient lives, an endeavour made possible because of the new birth that has occurred in their lives through the living word of God. (1 Pet 1:17-24). Every

chapter contains practical instruction as to how we should live and what attitude we should adopt. In the midst of all of this instruction comes a very clear command—to set apart Christ as Lord of our hearts and to be prepared to give an apologetic for the hope that we have (chapter 3:15). What then can we learn from this brief text about apologetics?

Firstly, the lordship of Christ needs to be a settled factor in our lives. The term "heart" does not just refer to the seat of our feelings, but also of our thoughts. Every part of us needs to be under the authority of, and obedient to, Christ.

The book of James speaks of the double-minded man. This turn of phrase does not mean to be two-faced, it means to try to look in two different directions, to be caught between two opinions and not have made a commitment either way. Such a person is simply swept along by the tide, tossed backward and forward by the ever-changing winds of public opinion. In contrast, the man who asks in faith is stable, and his prayers for wisdom are effective. The connotation is of someone who has been persuaded and has put his trust into that which is truthful.

The starting point for giving an apologetic, therefore, is not possessing a top-notch education or holding a proliferation of theological qualifications. It is accepting Christ's Lordship in all areas of our lives including our thinking. If we are still caught in two minds, if we are not convinced of the veracity of the Gospel, we will never be able to develop an effective apologetic for the hope that we have, because Christ is not Lord of all of our life.

Secondly, the context of the command is one of holiness. Our attitude, our actions, and how we treat other people is vitally important (1 Peter 3:8 ff). Even when faced with persecution, evil is not to be repaid with evil. The reason for the persecution is not because Christians are disobeying God's commands; it is because they *are* obeying his commands. Similarly, the assumption in 1 Peter 3:15 is that, because our lives and attitudes are different due to living in obedience to God's commands, people will ask questions as to why. We are told that some non-Christians will ask

questions, and that we should therefore be prepared. In other words, there should actually be a demand for an apologetic because of the quality of our lives. How we live should be generating intrigue in the Gospel. How are we doing on this front?

We must also remember that the letter of 1 Peter is addressed to the church. The command to give an apologetic is not one that is addressed to a handful of carefully selected specialists. The command to give an apologetic is one that is directed to every single member of the body of Christ. No one who is a Christian can excuse themselves.

It may be helpful here to draw a distinction between the process of evangelism and the gift of the evangelist. An evangelist is someone who has the gift of precipitating a decision in someone's life concerning their standing before Christ. Not everyone has this gift. However, the process of evangelism is something in which every believer is engaged. Every time we talk to someone about Christ, every time we invite someone to an event or to church, every time we give someone something to read, we are involved in that process. It is precisely in that process that apologetics plays a role. As soon as you begin to answer someone's question, or tell someone why you are a Christian, you are giving an apologetic. It is not a question of whether we engage in apologetics or not, but what kind of apologetic we are giving when the opportunity comes by.

Fourthly, there is the need to be prepared. "There is no problem so big or so complicated," wrote one graffiti artist, "that it can't be run away from." This is, of course, perfectly true. The increasing complexity and diversity of the choices we face in life, coupled with a rapidly changing postmodern society, mean that the easiest course of action when faced with an apparently great problem is to run away. However, the Christian is called to an engagement with, not a retreat from, the world.

Engagement, however, is going to take effort. It is much harder to fight a battle than it is to excuse yourself from one. The word translated "prepared" in the NIV has its root in the idea of being fit. Getting prepared is going to involve us exercising the effort necessary to make sure that we are ready. Opportunities to share our faith should not be lost because we haven't taken the time to think through what we would say. The trouble is, we often don't know how we can say what we think we should.

That is why many Christians have already put their thoughts onto paper to help us in this task. In that sense, authors of books about apologetics should be regarded as personal trainers, to help us develop a spiritual fitness for the questions that will inevitably come our way. These people write books not to put

weight on our bookshelves, but to lend weight to our thoughts and hence our conversations. Truly, we need to "stop thinking like children," being like infants in regard to evil while being like adults in our thinking (1 Corinthians 14:20).

Fifthly, the apostle talks of giving an answer for the *reason* for the hope that we have. People believe in all kinds of strange things. One of my colleagues in India loves to tell of the time he worked for the government there. One of the privileges he enjoyed was having a chauffeur-driven car to take him around on official business. In India, as over here, if a black cat crosses your path, it is considered to be bad luck. What was of interest was how each driver dealt with the problem when it occurred. One of his drivers would stop the car, reverse over the spot where the incident had taken place, and then drive off again, trying to undo what had happened. Another would open the window and spit out of it, trying to curse the curse, if you like, and somehow turn it into a blessing. The third was the most interesting. He would slow down, letting another car overtake him, and with it presumably taking away any bad luck that he had received as a result. You wonder if he was afraid to overtake anyone himself.

We would call these beliefs superstitions. There is no logic or reason behind them. The Apostle Peter, however, is quite clear. Believing that Christ died so that we might be saved is not a superstition. It is not like saying that black cats bring bad luck. Instead there is a reason for the hope that we have; there is a logic, if you like, behind the Gospel; there are reasons that can be communicated and explained concerning the atonement. We must be ready to give an explanation, a defense, of why the Gospel is true.

Given that the lordship of Christ in our own lives is the starting point for giving an apologetic, the Cross is where we are heading. The reason for the hope that we have is the Cross and resurrection. There is no other reason why the Christian has hope, and there is no other reason for our confidence. Any *apologia*, any answer aimed at giving the reason for the hope that we have must therefore lead to or flow from the Cross. We must never lose sight of this fact.

However, at the same time we must recognize that people may have other legitimate questions that need to be dealt with before they are prepared to give us a hearing. If someone believes that Christ was not an historical figure, for example, then we need to establish for them that he was. Such a task is not difficult. It may be that they are convinced that there is no such thing as truth, that it doesn't matter what you believe. Again, we need to help such a person understand why this point of view can't be sustained. Having done this, though, we must recognize that we haven't discharged

the Great Commission. We have made a small step—an important and vital step—but still only a small step, in the right direction. And as important as these are, we must remember that the reason we need to deal with these issues is so that we can clear away false ideas so that Christ can be seen for who he is.

Finally, our attitude is vital (1 Peter 3:16). The Christian does not share the Gospel out of a sense of moral superiority. Nor do we treat other people and their convictions with contempt. Instead, what we share is to be shared with gentleness and respect. Arrogance has never been an attractive or admirable quality, and it is all the more offensive when the message that is brought claims to be one of grace and peace. This is not to imply that the Gospel is to be compromised in any way. However, the mode and method of communicating the Gospel must be consistent with—not an obstruction to—the content that we are presenting.

Our confidence does not arise from the fact that we believe that our minds are infallible, or that we know everything. Several years ago, while at a seaside resort, I saw a tea-towel that read “Those of you who think that you know everything, are beginning to annoy those of us who do.” The funny thing is, of course, that the only person who could make such a statement is God! The Christian is not claiming exhaustive knowledge on an infinite subject. Our confidence rests in the reality of the relationship we enjoy with Christ, the change he has brought into our lives and the truthfulness of his claims. Our confidence is not in a system of thought. It is in the person of Christ. That is why the Apostle Paul says, “I know *whom* I have believed,” [emphasis added] and not *what* I have believed.

I am convinced that this is why we are also told that we should keep a clear conscience as we talk to others. We are not called on to pretend we know something when we don’t. Nor are we boasting of how great our own minds are, as if we had figured out everything by ourselves. With humility, the fear of God and honesty, we testify to the truth and reality of the Gospel message, that Christ is still alive.

The Gospel promises to change lives. It is no surprise, therefore, that people expect to see lives changed. If our attitude indicates that Christ makes no difference to how we live or how we treat others, we immediately undermine its credibility. Ultimately, our goal is not to win arguments, but to see people come to know Christ.

#### *From Why to How*

Having laid a biblical understanding concerning the command to give an apologetic, it then becomes important to consider how we go about fulfilling it. The temptation with apologetics is to offer set answers to set questions. Undoubtedly, it can be useful to have a

structure in mind when dealing with certain issues. However, far more useful is to have an understanding of how we can effectively engage with people at a conversational level.

If we read through any of the Gospels, we see that Jesus spent a lot of time talking with people. In chapter one of John’s Gospel, we find a record of Jesus’ conversations with the first disciples. In chapter two, water is turned into wine at a wedding, and we read about Jesus’ conversations with Mary. Chapter three contains Jesus’ well-known conversation with Nicodemus, followed by his conversation with the woman at the well in chapter four. In chapter six, we have a series of conversations recorded between Jesus and his disciples, and in chapter seven Jesus goes to the Feast of the Tabernacles. Again, he is interacting with the groups of people he meets there. It is easy to go on. Clearly Jesus did a lot of other things apart from talking to people. But whether he is talking to individuals, small groups, or large crowds, there is an immediacy and intimacy in what he does.

A while ago I was speaking at a conference on evangelism. An African Bishop was also there. Following his address, the question was raised as to why he thought so many people were becoming Christians in his part of the world, and so few in the West. He didn’t even stop to think about his answer. “When you walk around my neighborhood,” he replied, “you hear people talking to other people about Jesus—in restaurants, in shops, even in bus queues. While I have been here, however, very few people seem to be doing this.”

#### *Hesitating to Join In*

Maybe one of the reasons we are uncertain about engaging with some people is that we feel we don’t have all the answers. If you ever meet someone who does have all the answers, please let me know. I have some questions for that person myself. The truth is that none of us knows exactly what to say all the time. However, 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 questioners themselves.

Reading through the four Gospels reveals that Jesus asked well over one hundred questions of his critics and his questioners. Asking a question achieves many different things, but let me outline some things that are important here.

#### *Getting People to Think*

First, asking a question forces people to think. Thinking is not the enemy of the Christian faith. We

consistently see that Jesus asked questions to make people think about what they were saying.

In Luke 18, Jesus is asked the question, “Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” The question is a good one. On the face of it, this is a perfect question for Jesus to jump straight in and tell him what he should believe. Instead, Jesus decides to ask a question of his own. “Why do you call me good?” he replies. I don’t know if you have stopped to consider what went through the man’s mind when this reply came back. I am certain it was not a reply that he was expecting; I am equally certain that it caused him to begin thinking. “No one is good but God alone,” Jesus continues. However, if no one is good but God alone, and Jesus is good, then it must also follow that Jesus is God. Immediately, Jesus has taken this man to the logical conclusion that must follow from his own admission. It is done quickly and incisively, and there can be no doubt as to the implications that Jesus has spelled out.

#### *Exposing Contradictions*

Asking questions can also be a gentler way of exposing contradictions, and this is certainly the case when dealing with relativism. When I was an undergraduate, I was involved in a student support service. We were not allowed to give advice, only to listen and ask people questions. One evening, two young girls arrived at the center, one of whom had slashed her wrists with a razor blade in an attempt to take her own life. As they sat opposite me, the girl whose wrists were beginning to heal over looked at me and said, “There is no such thing as truth. If there was, then I would have a reason to live.”

My immediate reaction was to offer my resignation from the service there and then, so that I could proceed to tell her why I thought that this position was philosophically untenable. Instead, I asked her a simple question that I had been asked myself a few years earlier: “You say that there is no such thing as truth—tell me, is that statement true?” It was as if someone turned the lights on in her life. It is correct to conclude that life must be meaningless if there is no such thing as truth. However, the conclusion depends on the assumption made, and in this case, it is what is assumed that must be challenged. Failure to do this will always result in disaster—which is why one thinker defined logic as going wrong with confidence. A faulty starting point will throw everything else out of kilter.

The faulty assumption made is the belief that the claim “everything is relative” can be meaningfully stated. To state that everything is relative is to make an absolute claim. If it is absolute, then it follows that not everything is relative. Literally, nothing has been said.

You run into a similar problem if you try to deny that there is such a thing as truth. The statement “There is no such thing as truth” assumes that there is such a thing. What you are in effect saying is “The truth is, there is no such thing as truth.” However, if the statement is true, then there is such a thing as truth. If there is no such thing as truth, then the statement is not true. If it is not true, why believe it? The statement is literally nonsensical, and “nonsense remains nonsense,” said C. S. Lewis, “even if you talk it about God!”

#### *Defining the Issue*

Frequently as Christians, we want to jump in with answers to questions without really thinking about the assumptions in people’s minds concerning the issue at hand. In Matthew 22, Jesus is asked whether it is right to pay taxes to Caesar or not. If someone asked you today whether you thought Christians should pay their taxes or not, the answer you would give, I’m sure, would be “yes.” Why is it, then, that in Matthew 22, instead of giving a one-word answer, Jesus again asks a series of questions of his own? The reason is that the issue of paying taxes had become clouded in the minds of the people in Jesus’ day. As a matter of fact, Jesus knows that the question is a trap.

Israel was under occupation by the Romans, who were regarded by the Jews as the evil oppressors. To pay taxes, and certainly to collect them, was seen to be strengthening the hand of the enemy. Was not Israel God’s chosen people? Was this not their land? Surely to help the Romans was to go against God himself. In the minds of the listeners, if Jesus is going to be on God’s side, he is expected to say no. If he says no, it will get back to the authorities, and he will be arrested—which is what the questioners want. If he says yes, then he will lose the respect of the people. As far as the questioners are concerned, it is a win/win situation.

Jesus however asks for a coin. “Whose portrait is this?” He asks. “Whose inscription?” “Caesar’s,” they reply. “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s,” Jesus answers.

Do you see what has happened? Jesus has redefined the issue at hand. Yes, pay your taxes, he says, but he answers in such a way as to make sure that no one misunderstands what he is saying. He has not only answered the question, but also the sentiment and prejudice that lay behind the question. Frequently, as Christians, we think we have discharged our obligation to communicate the Gospel by answering questions put to us, without attempting to disarm what lies behind the question.

Let’s take a contemporary example with a lot of feeling behind it, the question of abortion. The temptation again is to rush in with answers, when really we

should first of all be thinking about questions to help the situation along. The way that the issue is normally phrased is in terms of choice—does a woman have the right to choose what happens to her own body? The question, when phrased this way, seems to allow only one answer—yes, she does have the right to choose.

However, it is actually the wrong starting question. The first question is not about choice, it is about how to define life. If you were to ask the question, “When does someone have the right to terminate an innocent person’s life?” the answer from most people would be never. The primary question, therefore, is not one of choice, but how do you define life? Is what is in the womb a human life or not? If it is a human life, should it be protected? If it is not a human life, what is wrong in terminating it? Many people define life pragmatically in terms of what we do, and the fetus doesn’t really do much. For the Christian, however, life is defined, essentially, on the basis of who we are. To answer the question of choice without first raising the issue about how to define life is to fall into a trap by failing to effectively communicate with the people listening.

Giving the right answer does not rectify the problem of asking the wrong question. The question must first be reformulated before any answer can be given.

There is much more that can be said and written on this topic. Indeed, it already has. Let us listen carefully to what is being asked, and then get as much help as

we can to effectively share that which has changed our lives.

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*During his time at Sheffield, he became increasingly involved with and committed to apologetics and evangelism. Although a career in law or economics was the obvious direction, Michael knew that his passion was to share Christ and to help remove the obstacles to faith.*

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