

# 16 verbs for a 21<sup>st</sup> Century apologetics

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What I would like to propose amounts (I hope!) to a strategy for apologetics informed by the Scriptures, theology, culture and the dynamics of human communication. Recognize that apology may be given in a range of settings: in a personal conversation, in a youth group or Bible study group to people who are mainly Christians, in a lecture, in an evangelistic setting such as a dialogue dinner, in a Scripture class or in a piece of writing...

## 1. Begin with prayer

Starting with prayer reminds us of the sovereignty of God in the exercise of apologetics. Apologetics is a deliberate activity, involving thought, study and persuasion. It would be easy for us to imagine that it is entirely dependent on us—and to blame ourselves for our failures and to glory in our successes. We need to do our best to persuade; and leave the changing of hearts to God.

## 2. Listen carefully, attentively and intelligently

Successful apologetics is an act of communication; and communication depends on understanding. It is important to be a skilled listener in order to make sure that we understand what people are really asking. Then the reply can be tailored to fit the person or group to whom we are speaking; not only that, the *tone* of your reply can be shaped to fit. One helpful habit to practice is to restate the case of the person who is bringing the charge against Christianity and allow them to correct you if necessary. Takes seriously what other people say.

### 3. Study your culture of context

Not unrelated to (2) is the need to study the culture within which we do apologetics. What informs the opinions of the people we are talking to? What shapes their impressions of Christianity? What are the dreams, hopes, aspirations, fears, loves and hates of that particular demographic, generally speaking? Even when you are consuming popular culture, ask what this says about the culture spiritually speaking. For example, Australians traditionally have an anti-authoritarian streak that makes promoting the institutional church an uphill battle. But it also makes Jesus an appealing figure with his critique of religious and political authorities and their pomposity and self-righteousness. Or, it is worth knowing that young people in the "Millennial" generation are more optimistic and self-confident than their Gen-X predecessors. They are less likely to respond well to a bleak diagnosis of the world's problems.

### 4. Engage in dialogue

Effective apologetics occurs in conversation, especially in the contemporary context. The Christian apologist should seek—indeed make—opportunities for dialogue. Christians have gained a reputation for delivering apologetic salvos from on high rather than actually seeking the opportunity of being attacked to make connections. The most obvious reason for doing this is that some people are very ill informed about Christianity and it is actually quite a simple matter to offer a corrective.

### 5. See apologetics as not an end in itself but as clearing a runway for the gospel

It is important that apologetics be ancillary to evangelism. The danger of engaging apologetics may be that we become bogged down or diverted. Many non-Christians use various issues as a fogging tactic, and aren't really interested in hearing answers. Some

people just love a good argument for the sake of it; or enjoy baiting Christians. In this case, it is usually advisable to avoid playing the game; but be careful of any onlookers.

## 6. Be intellectually flexible

When I say be intellectually flexible, I mean that we should be careful not to tie Christianity too closely to a secular world view which may later be discredited. The history of apologetics teaches us this: while the thinking of Plato and Aristotle was useful for apologists searching for common ground with their opponents, sometimes their Christianity became thoroughly imbued with those forms of Greek thinking and distorted as a result. In our context, we ought not to defend modernism against postmodernism (or the other way around), because Christianity is not wedded to either of them.

## 7. Be a critical realist

How can you know anything? Well the Christian world view does assume that the world can be known and that God gives in an order. But it is also true that knowledge requires knowers; and human knowers can't know everything. We do see things from our perspective and our perspective does condition what we see *and* our perspective is affected by sin. But we do see something—we can actually know things. What we do have is a being who does know everything and who guarantees the order of the world by his promises to it. Even if we don't see it yet, we have God's underwriting of the meaning and meaningfulness of the world.

This means that we can both recognise that of course our perspective conditions our knowledge; but that we can still know things. It *is* possible to have a meaningful discussion about truth, history and language without claiming to know everything.

## 8. Assume a basic natural knowledge of God

The presuppositionalist apologist begins with assumption that there is absolutely no natural knowledge of God available to the non-elect. However, this is a poor reading of the passages, such as Romans 1, that speak of the noetic effects of sin. There may not be

saving knowledge of God; but it is true that something of God may be learnt from the creation. Every human being at least has the longing for God that they may not yet be able to name, since this is part of how we are made.

## 9. Build communities of grace and live authentic

### Christian lives

One powerful lesson from church history is that the early church's success humanly speaking was the result of the remarkable difference they made in their treatment of one another. They were visibly a community of mutual love and sacrifice. They treated women and slaves as equals. They did not abandon the sick or the dying. They shared their possessions with the poor.

One of the most savage contemporary critiques of Christianity is that it is life-denying and not a happy way to live. Let us build churches that prove them wrong! Make sure the culture of the church you are in is strongly grace-filled in its character – hospitable, caring, sober, joyous, honouring of the opposite sex, realistic about suffering and careful of speech. The difference will be profound. People will see it and ask you to give a reason for your hope...

## 10. Critique the beliefs of others

In the last lecture we began to critique aspects of the secular world view. It is quite appropriate for us to question others as to what they believe and as to whether that stacks up to the criteria of truth—is it internally coherent and does it stack up with reality. Likewise, is that belief really working in life? Does it produce what it promises?

For example, how do they know that reincarnation is true? Can they really trust themselves to be the ultimate arbiters of morality? How can they say that all religions are basically the same without violating them all? Is there really no truth? Has science really proved religion wrong? Where exactly? Where in the Bible *does* it condone slavery?

Sometimes we are too polite and refrain from offering contradictions. It is worth calling people's bluff on their assertions about Christianity and religious truth in general.

Often their ignorance is exposed! Get them to do some apologetics for a change...

Francis Schaeffer spoke of creating a "climate of uncertainty" for the unbeliever.

## 11. Know history

Especially this is true of history. Most people have a kind of potted view of history that is made up of the most ill informed generalisations you can imagine. They mindlessly repeat the 'religion causes wars' mantra. On the whole, describing a few actual details quickly reveals that they are only repeating media cant. To know some history is a real aid in several of the major apologetic challenges of our era. In particular, we depend on historical argument when it comes to the resurrection and the life of Jesus.

It is also worth learning how Christianity has contributed to the peace and prosperity of the world. The history of nursing, social work, medicine and several other professions is inextricably linked with Christianity.

## 12. Appeal to the imagination

Alister McGrath writes: "Effective apologetics does not so much impose Christian truth upon people; it draws them into that truth in such a way that they can appreciate and appropriate it." That is to say, the power of the story or the image has a convictional power that mere argument often does not. C.S. Lewis and G.K. Chesterton were two great apologists who were also literary giants, excelling at telling the Christian story as much as arguing the Christian case.

## 13. Know your personal testimony

Your personal story is a powerful apologetic weapon. It is worth spending time developing a thought-out, theologically informed, simply communicated account of your life that you can give in a range of settings. But don't leave it at the story of your conversion: it is worth reflecting on how being a Christian has made a difference in an ongoing way. Why are you a Christian now? How has being a Christian affected your choices in life? How has it helped during your darkest hours?

## 14. Seek points for intersection with the Bible

The Bible is little understood in our culture, though a memory of it lingers. People are largely ignorant of what is in it. Practice thinking of ways in which the Bible connects with what is around you. Does the Bible treat a theme from a film in a different way, for example? Is a character in a novel similar to one in the Bible? Would the Bible have something to say about a current affairs story? (What about the 50,000 sheep, for example?)

## 15. Allow the Bible to speak *dynamically*

Developing on (14), the Bible offers us a grand narrative of everything, not a bunch of rules. And yet that is how people understand it. What we need to do is retell that story—to speak about the return of Jesus, and the creation of the world, and the fall and the cross and resurrection. In these events lies our apologetic. That's what the Bible is about—not a bunch of weird rules from Leviticus. On the issue of homosexuality for example, we might want to say that that sexual expression is not part of the created order, in fact it is a symptom of human rejection of the creator; but that Christ died in order to return us to right relationship with God.

## 16. If necessary, say 'I don't know' or 'good point' or 'I'll get back to you'

The integrity of the process of apologetics is important. Part of dialogue is acknowledging you may actually learn something from someone else. Don't be afraid of this! Be courageous enough to say 'I don't know'; and then go away and look it up or ask someone else. If you are not quick on your feet, write an email or a letter. Taking people's questions seriously enough to get back to them is an impressive witness in itself.