

On-Target Apologetics

By David Feddes

When you study apologetics, you learn a lot of things that you can say to show people the truth of Christianity. You learn how to talk about evidence, argument, and persuasion. Learning to say the right things is very important. Learning how to talk about apologetic matters can be valuable. But before you do too much studying of how to talk, the most important thing in effective apologetics is learning to listen. You need to listen order to know God's truth; you need to listen in order to understand the cultural context of the person you're dealing with; and you need to listen in order to understand that particular individual.

Learning to Listen

First, you need to *know God's truth*. That means studying the Scriptures, knowing how to explain what's in the Bible, and knowing how to defend and contend for biblical truth. Study the Bible, and listen to mature Christians who understand it and have some experience in apologetics. By listening very carefully and learning to know God's truth and how to make it clear, you'll be a lot more effective when you start talking about it.

Second, it is vital to *know the context*. That means you need to study the culture of the person or persons you're talking to. You need to know that cultural context, its practices, its assumptions, as well as the worldview that shapes the people within that context. For instance, let's say you're trying to reach people on a college campus. You had better understand a little bit about what it's like to be a college student and the kinds of temptations college students face, the kinds of sins they're most prone to, what a college classroom might be like on a big university campus, and so on. When I talk about studying a culture, I don't necessarily mean an overseas culture, but a culture quite different from the one you've been accustomed to living in. If you want to minister in a university context, then understand the university culture. If you want to minister to people who are Muslim, whether you're going to that culture or whether people from Muslim background have come into your own society, you need to understand that culture and its assumptions. If you want to minister to a Muslim, you must learn to listen so you know what Islam teaches and the particular version of Islam that this particular person believes in. Know the background and the context, the religion of the person you're talking to. Know their particular version of that religion, and try to learn more about the situation and the country they came from.

Third, get to *know the person individually*. Pay attention to the individual. Don't assume you know much about them. Don't jump to conclusions based on one or two facts you've learned. For instance, let's say you are talking to a person who is a nominal Roman Catholic. Maybe they were baptized and grew up never going to church, but they still call themselves a Catholic. You might say, "Oh, I know what Catholics believe," and list all those Catholic beliefs in your head, believing you've got to talk that person out of believing those things. But maybe that person knows almost nothing about what Catholics believe. I know a lot more about what Catholics believe than many, many Catholics do. I've read the 700-page New Catechism of the Catholic Church cover to cover, but I should not assume every Catholic I run into has read the New Catechism cover to cover or knows the historic teachings of Catholic belief. Just because somebody has a label, don't assume you know them. If someone you meet is a Muslim, you may have a particular stereotype of what a Muslim is, but Muslims come from different cultures. Muslims in Indonesia are going to be quite different from Muslims in Africa, and these Muslims will be quite different from Muslims in Pakistan. Within each of those countries and areas, there

may be many individual differences. In order to know what an individual believes, you need to listen and listen and listen some more to that person. Then listen in order to know what that person's own experiences have been, what their own struggles have been, and what their yearnings are. Once you really know somebody, you might be closer to connecting with them. Remember, in apologetics it's important not just that you understand the truths of the Christian faith, it's also important that you understand the person you're trying to reach so you can communicate in their language in ways that resonate with them. For your apologetics to be on target, know God's truth, know the context, and know the person.

Off-Target by Ignoring Scripture

You can go off-target by ignoring Scripture. An apologetic argument may seem smart, but does it accurately reflect God's Word? Let's say you want to show that Christianity is compatible with evolution because you're in a context where the people believe every word of the theory of evolution, just as they've been taught. They think evolution is absolutely right. They think anybody with a decent education, anybody who is rational at all, would have to agree that the earth is billions and billions of years old and human life and all other forms of life developed through an evolutionary process of random mutations and natural selection. You might assume your goal is to show that Christianity is completely compatible with that view. The people believing the evolutionary theory might be more easily persuaded to think Christianity is right if they think it meshes perfectly with evolution. But you still have to answer the question, "Is that true to the Bible?" You might find the early chapters of Genesis kind of embarrassing or want to just dismiss them as a poem or folk tale and then get on to the essence of it. God created the earth, and evolution is how he did it. But is that really true? Is that what the Bible? Before you move on to the other questions of apologetic strategy, you first have to answer the question of whether your strategy is faithful to the Bible's teaching.

Here's another question from a different angle. You might argue that evidence of design in the world around us perfectly displays the Creator's wisdom and goodness. Just look at the beauty of the sunset or the glory of the mountain or the way some designs just seem to work flawlessly. It's amazing proof that the whole creation perfectly displays the Creator. Does it really, though? There's evil and death all around us. The Bible teaches that the creation around us does not display the Creator's goodness perfectly. The creation around us is distorted by sin. Creation was cursed by the Creator after the first humans fell into sin, and we're under God's judgment. The curse that came after Adam and Eve sinned, the chaos that came at the time of the flood, and the ongoing bondage to decay the Bible talks about in Romans 8, are all facts that show the earth is not in a state of perfect design right now. The world around us still has evidence that it had its origins in a good and wise Maker, but it also has evidence of much else that is not so wise or good. We shouldn't pretend that it's all just one beautiful, perfectly running machine. Those who have argued that way have not only gone contrary to the Bible but have turned people off, because it's very hard for most people to believe that the world, as it is, is a perfect reflection of God's goodness.

In dealing with the problem of how God can be real in a world with so much suffering, you might say that some things are outside of God's control. Is that so? Is that what the Bible says, that some things malfunction because God can't handle them or he didn't foresee them? Someone a number of years ago wrote a book called *Why Do Bad Things Happen to Good People?* The explanation was that God is trying his best to influence events in a positive way, but there are a lot of things that happen beyond God's control, and we've got to learn to live with

those. Someone who read the book said, “Well, if that’s what God is like, why doesn’t he resign so somebody more competent can take his place?” Comments like that aside, what does the Bible say? The Bible says that even though demons and sinful people are going against God’s revealed will, in another sense, God is still carrying out his plan through them, and his purposes are not thwarted. There is nothing outside of God’s control.

Whenever we’re trying to prove something or take a particular angle to make Christianity more believable, we’ve got to make sure we’re representing the Bible’s teaching accurately. We’re going to go off target if we ignore what Scripture teaches and tweak it to fit the way humans are currently thinking.

Off-target by Ignoring Context

We can go off target not just by ignoring the Bible but by ignoring the context that a person is in or the context they come from. This means, among other things, that we have to choose wisely what to talk about and what not to talk about. If you’re talking to an atheist, agnostic, or secularist, you might want to give good arguments for God’s existence and make a case that miracles can happen. But if you’re talking to a Muslim, don’t trot out all of your arguments for God’s existence. Muslims already believe God is real. They believe there’s one God. They believe miracles happen. You don’t have to prove it to them unless they are more secularized Muslims. Again, you have to listen to the individual to find out what kind of Muslim he or she is, but if you’re not dealing with an atheist, don’t work too hard to prove God’s existence unless you learned the person has serious doubts about it.

Another example is that you might work really hard to prove spirits are real because you’ve come from a background where people didn’t take spirits seriously. They were overly scientific in their thinking. You’re going to show that spirits are real because people need to know that. But what if you’re talking to an animist or a spiritist? Let’s say somebody comes from a background where they believe there are spirits in the trees, spirits in the animals, spirits in the rocks, spirits almost everywhere. They grew up in a setting where there was absolutely no question that spirits were real. Their only question was: how do you deal with all these different spirits who might afflict you or help you? The kinds of answers you give to that person are very different from the answers you give to somebody who needs to find out spirits are real in the first place.

You might be talking to a Hindu and say, “Jesus is God.” The Hindu person yawns and says, “Well, of course, Jesus is God. Isn’t everybody?” You haven’t taken into account the context and the kind of beliefs and worldview that the person has. Hindus believe there are more than 300 million gods! To say Jesus is God might not be very helpful to them. You need to show that, first of all, not everything is God. Some of the more intellectual Hindus, being pantheists, don’t believe in 300 million gods. They believe that everything ultimately is God and God is all of us and all of us are God. To say, “Jesus is God” is not very helpful to them. You first have to show what it means to say a being is God and deal with the question of whether pantheism is true or not. You need to understand their context and set of beliefs before you say very much. There may be others situations where you have to show Jesus is God right away because it’s their main question, but with a Hindu, you have to show God is someone special and unique and personal, not just the force that’s in everything.

Showing the Bible’s reliability might help somebody who doesn’t take the Bible seriously or thinks it’s full of errors. If you’re talking to a devout Mormon, however, don’t spend too much time trying to prove the Bible is true and reliable. Mormons already accept the Bible as

true and reliable. They may go wrong in misinterpreting and misunderstanding the Bible. They may go wrong in misunderstanding who Jesus is and the way of salvation. They may go wrong in adding the Book of Mormon to the Bible. But they're not wrong in thinking the Bible is God's truth and that it's reliable. You don't need to prove things they already believe.

Another kind of issue might come when you're dealing with people who've come through the postmodern mindset and education system. A postmodern person doesn't put much stock in logic, evidence, and objective truth in the first place. You may be trotting out your very best logic and all of the best evidence you can find, but logic and evidence don't connect with a postmodern mindset. They still might be open to certain kinds of persuasion that will lead them in the direction of truth, because even post-moderns who reject objective truth may still crave experience and relationship. If you relate to them in a Christian manner, if you invite them to come to a place of Christian worship and experience Christian fellowship and the love of God, perhaps that will get through where logic and evidence don't.

If you don't pay attention to the context people are in and the kinds of questions that they in their particular context are likely to have, you may be proving all sorts of things they already believe and didn't need you to prove. On the other hand, you may be resorting to methods and arguments of showing them something that are going to be utterly ineffective because it's not something they connect to in the first place. Make sure you pay attention to context rather than going off target by ignoring context.

Off-target by Ignoring the Person

Another way of going off target is by ignoring the person. You have to pay very close attention and listen to that person as an individual and what is prompting them with the various things they're asking or talking to you about.

I received a message from someone who said he no longer accepted the authority of the Bible. What should you do when you receive a message like that? I could explain, "Well, here's manuscript evidence for the reliability of the biblical manuscripts. Here are a variety of things showing the Bible to be reliable." In response to that statement, I could go into all the evidences for why the Bible is reliable. Instead, I just messaged back, "Why don't you believe in the reliability of the Bible anymore?" The person wrote back and said, "Well, I just had two major surgeries and my pain is so horrible today, and actually I still do believe in the reliability of the Bible. I really didn't mean it." That person did not need a lot of arguments about the reliability of the Bible. They just needed somebody to listen and say, "Oh, sorry to hear that. I'll pray for you." Many times when you're communicating with somebody, you have to hear what's really bothering them, what's really troubling them, and get beneath the issue they brought up.

You may have somebody say, "Christianity is unscientific." You might want to respond with some things you learned in apologetics. You can say, "Oh, some of the world's greatest scientists profess Christianity: Galileo, Copernicus, Newton, and many modern scientists. Christianity formed the basis of the worldview that even gave us science in the first place." All that would be true, and it might be valuable and helpful for some persons. First, though, you have to listen, because the person who says "Christianity is unscientific" may just have known some really foolish, anti-intellectual Christians who turned them off. That's a different kind of issue than simply trotting out lots of evidence for them. Sometimes it's wise to ask, "When did you start realizing or thinking Christianity is unscientific?" You may find out they just started going to college six months ago. They're hanging around with students and professors who think Christianity doesn't make much sense. You say, "Well, did they give you any evidence for that,

any proof, any argument?" Their answer is no. You soon find out it's all just the result of being in a different crowd of people. It's not a matter of having received new arguments against Christianity. Once you understand where the person is coming from or what experience may have motivated them to say something, you're in a better position to address it.

You might have somebody else who says, "All the evil and suffering of the world proves there's no God in charge of things." Maybe they happened to watch the news and saw there was a big tragedy, so they said, "Oh, that's awful. I don't see how God could be real with that terrible tragedy." Or they might have been reading a book that had a detailed, in-depth philosophical argument that the existence of God is not compatible with pain and suffering in the world. Or they may have just suffered a devastating loss in their own life or have gone through terrible suffering. How you should address them depends greatly on their circumstances. If they have just suffered a devastating loss, they don't need a lengthy argument and a bunch of proofs. Instead, you follow the Bible's advice, "Weep with those who weep." They need an arm around their shoulder, somebody to care, somebody to listen. There may come a time when you talk about the intellectual aspects of it as well. Very often, though, somebody who has suffered the blow of evil and suffering needs, first of all, compassion and love before they need any explanations.

Somebody may say, "The church is full of hypocrites." Well, sometimes that is just the most shallow excuse in the world. It's very easy to explain that just because there are hypocrites doesn't mean Christianity isn't real. If you heard somebody playing music by Bach and butchering it, would you say, "Boy, that Bach didn't know anything about music. What a lousy composer!" No, you would just say, "Well, that person is not a very good pianist." If you see somebody who is a terrible hypocrite, the only logical thing to say is, "That person isn't a very good follower of Jesus, if they're a follower at all." It doesn't prove anything about whether Jesus is for real. You could explain all that, but it may be that you should have listened more before saying much. When they say the church is full of hypocrites, is there a particular hypocrite who really hurt them? You could give an explanation stating that just because there are hypocrites doesn't mean Christianity isn't true, but what if the reason they complained about hypocrites is because their own father was a deacon in the church who abused them severely? What if their father and mother went to church and smiled pleasantly and were nice to everybody and seemed saintly when they were in church, but then fought like cats and dogs when they were at home? What if the person was sexually molested by a pastor? People who have suffered such terribly deep wounds aren't going to be helped by an explanation of how the church can have hypocrites in it and yet Christianity still is true. They first need you to hear their story. They first need to know you care about why they're so offended by hypocrites in the church.

You may hear somebody say, "It's arrogant to say Jesus is the only way of salvation." It's certainly important to be able to address that wisely and tell them, "Jesus himself said he is the only way. I'm not being arrogant. It's not my idea. Jesus is the one who said it." But that might not be the first thing you should say. Sometimes you may have to ask first, "Why do you think Christians are arrogant? Have you run into some Christians who seemed really arrogant or pushy or obnoxious to you?" If they say no, then you call their bluff and respond, "If you haven't met any Christians who struck you as overly arrogant, then why do you say they're so arrogant? Maybe it's possible to believe Jesus is the only way and still be humble." On the other hand, they may have run into some really arrogant and obnoxious Christians, and that's the main reason why they think Christians are arrogant and obnoxious. You may have to listen to what they have to say about real grievances rather than just dismiss their objection with some clever apologetic arguments.

Why would somebody say, “Christianity is just all do’s and don’ts?” They might say it because they’ve been brought up by legalistic Christians, or because they know some extremely legalistic Christians who don’t know much about God’s grace at but are always talking about do’s and don’ts. Or they may have a very, very different reason. Sometimes people who object to Christianity as too legalistic are themselves immersed in sin. One obvious case is people who are immersed in sexual sin. They don’t like what the Bible says about pornography or homosexuality or fornication among people who are unmarried. They say Christianity is just puritanical. It’s all do’s and don’ts. The reason they say that is because they want to keep wallowing in their own sin. When you get to that point, then you say, “You’re not really saying Christianity is that legalistic. You just want to live a different way and don’t want to be a committed follower of Jesus Christ who enjoys living the Lord’s way.”

There are a good many questions and objections people bring to Christianity but they’re brought for a wide variety of reasons. The only way you know what that person’s real reason is is by listening to that person’s story, asking a few questions, and probing just a little deeper before starting to trot out the long list of what you know and what you’re apologetic answers are going to be. On target apologetics is to learn to listen before you say too much. Listen to God’s truth and know it well. Know the context, know the person, pay very, very close attention to that individual and keep on listening. Then target that person.

Target the Person

Seek to win the person, not the argument. I remember when I was still a seminary student doing an internship with a veteran pastor. On one occasion, we were in a group of people, and someone said something that sounded wrong to me, so I decided to refute that person. I knew my stuff, and I showed very clearly that they were mistaken and were dead wrong. Well, after we left that conversation, my mentor said to me, “Dave, you were absolutely right, and you had excellent arguments, but when you strip somebody naked, throw them a towel. You just won an argument, but you lost a person. You outsmarted them and outtalked them, but you didn’t win them over.” I’ve never forgotten that. Seek to win a person, not just an argument.

Be alert for things in their surroundings or background that make belief in God’s truth harder, whether personal experiences or a whole mindset that affects the society they’re part of.

Address the person’s challenges. Don’t bring up non-issues for them. If you’re talking with someone who already believes in God, don’t spend too much time trying to prove God’s existence. If you’re talking to somebody who already believes the Bible, don’t spend too much time on biblical reliability. Talk about their issues, and use things they can connect with.

Connect with the heart, not just the head. Many of the head issues people bring up may seem tailor-made for apologetic arguments, but in reality the head issues are not the main problem that really troubles them. Whether it’s the problem of suffering in the world or the problem of hypocrites or whatever else they mention, it’s something that struck them in the gut or afflicted their heart, not just a puzzle that troubled their mind. As you’re dealing with a person—not just an intellect but a whole person—keep aiming for the heart.

There are times when you have to show that someone’s unbelief isn’t just intellectual but involves stubborn rebellion. You might think I am just a touchy, feely, warm person as I talk about the importance of listening to the person and taking seriously their wounds and hurts. But also take seriously their sins. Jesus said, “Men love darkness instead of light because their deeds are evil.” Sometimes after you’ve listened to a person and established a bridge of relationship and they know you care about them, you will also be able to put your finger on the fact that they

have an issue that is not merely intellectual. They just want to keep sinning without answering to a higher authority. A well-known philosopher said, “You know, I’m troubled by the fact that many of the smartest people I know believe in God. I’m an atheist, and it’s not just that I don’t believe there’s a God, I don’t *want* there to be a God. I have a cosmic authority problem.” He has a clearer self-understanding than many have. There are a lot of people with a cosmic authority problem. They do not want somebody authoritative running their life. They are involved in stubborn rebellion against God. A philosopher may offer all sorts of fancy arguments against God, but the core issue is rebellion, and at some point it may be necessary for you to say so. Say lovingly but very clearly, “I don’t think your main problem is that you find Christianity too hard to believe. I think you don’t want Jesus to run your life.” We have to be candid about that when we’re targeting the person. Sometimes we have to go straight for the heart and the distorted will.

As you talk to the person about the Lord, talk to the Lord about the person. Keep praying. Even as you’re talking to the person, right in the middle of the conversation, have your mind multi-tasking and talking to the Lord. Say in your mind, “Lord, help this person. Help them to see the truth, and help me to listen to them and understand them better so that I can convey your truth more effectively.” As you talk to the person about the Lord, keep talking to the Lord about the person. As you listen to that person, be listening to the Spirit of God for the insights you need to reach that person’s heart. What you want is to win that person.

As you add more and more to your stock of knowledge in the realm of apologetics, as you seek to become more capable in defending the faith and explaining the faith and persuading people of the faith, always remember to listen, listen, listen.