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A poverty stricken student reaches the end of her financial resources and writes home appealing for money. If we were so rude as to open her letter (or if we were to receive it!), what would we find? What sort of letter would it be? How would she persuade her parents to hand over the cash? What sort of techniques would she employ?

If we decided to analyse her letter like we might analyse someone's argument in a debate, we would find a collection of different reasons and approaches, all designed to convince her parents to do what she wants. We might find some strictly 'logical' arguments, such as "If I don't need to get a part time job then I can finish my degree this year, and then I'll get a good job and be able to quickly repay all the money I owe you."

She will probably also appeal to paternal affection and guilt, reassuring them of her continued commitment to family expectations. Not all of this communication will be explicit. For instance, the letter may finish "I was at Nan's for lunch on Sunday – we had a lovely afternoon. I also rang Aunt Nell the other night – she is well and sends her love." These tidbits of news say to her parents "See, I am still a faithful member of the family – I deserve support." In this case, the parents would probably find these 'affective' arguments more persuasive than any 'logical' or 'commercial' appeal.

The Complexities of Communication

Communication is a complex business. Most of us manage it successfully by doing what feels right at the time, but when we stop and think about it, it starts to get complicated.

Communicating the gospel and defending it is more complex than most communication. We often seem to be speaking a different language from our listeners. We have to make our appeal from within one framework of beliefs (Christianity) to another, quite different one (anything else). It can be a bit like trying to get water and oil to mix. Words which, in the gospel, have one meaning can mean something very different to non-Christians (e.g. 'justification' or 'faith') – or they may seem to mean nothing at all (e.g. 'Holy Spirit'). The problem is not just words; an idea such as 'sin' can be difficult for people to understand even when we are not using any jargon. Beyond these problems of 'meaning', good communication also depends on more subtle factors, such as those raised in our student's letter.

Good evangelists tend to have the ability to recognize these complexities of communication and use them profitably. However, often when people write or speak about apologetics and evangelism, they concentrate on only one element of the communication process. They give the impression that if we simply 'tell the truth' or 'use appropriate language' or 'expose presuppositions', then the communication will 'work'. I don't think this is very helpful.

Doing what works

Often when people discuss apologetics they are looking for one 'knock-down-all purpose-argument': perhaps it is 'the historical reliability of the New Testament' or it may be 'the amazing

number of fulfilled prophecies in the Bible’ or ‘the way our world shows evidence of being designed’. It often sounds as if one of these arguments might become the single great apologetic Intercontinental Ballistic Missile, which can be aimed at anywhere on the planet with an assurance of devastating results! Unfortunately, I don’t think such an argument exists. Instead, we have to work far harder at understanding the people we are speaking to, and shape our arguments to suit them.

Communication is complicated and is always shaped to some extent by the person with whom we are communicating. This means that we will keep asking ourselves the question, “Is this working?”. We will need to be pragmatic. But there are important limits to this pragmatism. We must reflect the message which we hope to defend. We cannot adopt a method which changes the message of the gospel, such as removing its supernatural elements in order to appeal to modern people, or ignoring the call to repentance on issues to which the audience is sensitive. Further, we must not deny the message by arguing in a way that is inconsistent with the message, such as being dishonest or manipulative.

One area in which traditional apologists have exhausted much energy is the search for the right philosophical basis on which to build our apologetic arguments. Some of this energy could be more efficiently channelled. The basic questions of philosophy are certainly important to a Christian understanding of the world, and the Bible may address them at some points, but spending a great deal of time and effort defining, refining and redefining our philosophical basis will not solve all of the apologist’s problems.

It may not be necessary to build our apologetics upon any single philosophy, and such recognition would be very liberating. It would leave the apologist free to appeal to certain elements in his or her audience’s world-view, if they seem useful. An apologist does not have to totally reconstruct the audience’s framework of thought before arguing for Christianity. That is not our task. A more flexible approach to philosophy can be adopted, because we are trying to proclaim the gospel, not a philosophy.

Direction

The direction that our apologetics should take is determined by the message which it defends. At this point, apologetics becomes entangled with evangelism (which is only its proper fate!). ‘Apologetics’ and ‘evangelism’ will overlap because it is only after hearing the gospel that people raise objections to it, and some knowledge of the message is essential before any defence of it is sensible.

The apologist’s aim is to bring people to the gospel, or better, to bring the gospel to them – to announce the good news of the kingdom, to proclaim that Jesus is Lord and to tell of his death and the forgiveness that it brings. This is more than a truism; it guides the apologist in crafting his or her arguments. The best argument is the one most likely to result in people thinking about Jesus.

The idea of direction that I am proposing is different from some approaches among Christians, which hope to build a step-by-step apologetic procedure to finally reach Jesus. For instance, Norman Geisler summarises his book, *Christian Apologetics*, as one extensive argument with

eleven steps. Step one is deciding how one tests a 'world-view', step ten is the conclusion 'Christ is God' and eleven 'Christ verified the Bible as the word of God'. However, if we begin the apologetic exercise with the direction of 'getting to Jesus', and knowing that we do not have to rework someone's entire world-view before we introduce Jesus, then we will not think it necessary to always go through all of Geisler's steps. We will be far more flexible and will find ourselves listening carefully to our partners in discussion.

Four Phases

Rather than searching for one perfect argument, it is much better to recognize that we need lots of apologetic approaches. Good apologetics will do four things, although a single conversation will not necessarily do all four and they may not be done in any particular order, nor have the same emphasis each time. In fact, the four things are often intertwined and repeated.

What are the four phases?

1. Defensive

The first phase is 'defensive'. People often have outright objections to what you have told them and you have to meet these. The objections may be philosophical ("How can a modern person believe in miracles?"); they may ask for clarification of the message ("What happens to people who haven't heard?"); or they may be personal ("I could not be forgiven for the things I have done"). The different objections require very different approaches. They may be matters of fact, or they may require a more complex defence. If the objection was something like, "How could I believe in a God who executed an innocent man?" you may have to answer, "I can't really answer that satisfactorily until I explain more about the message of Christianity".

2. Offensive

The second phase is 'offensive'. You want to show that there are problems in what your friend believes. Non-Christian world-views claim to provide a basis for human living. They offer an explanation of the human predicament and a system of values, and they claim to provide a basis for the discovery of truth. They can be analysed, questioned and attacked in the same way that Christianity is. We can toss the ball back into the court of our non-Christian friends and ask them to defend what they believe against our objections. The arguments must suit the person, but with people who are thinking in a fairly Western way, we will often be trying to demonstrate the impossibility of knowledge without God, and the impossibility of satisfying human longings without knowledge.

3. Being sure

Many non-Christians demand that we answer the question "How do you know this is true?". Again the answer needs to suit the questioner. If the questioner accepts a 'common sense' view of how we know things, then historical evidence may well be powerful. In other cases, you may have to argue about how we know anything is true.

In either case, we offer a 'bridge' of understanding, by which non-Christians may move from where they are now, to seeing the possibility that Christianity is true and then to trusting it fully. This movement is deliberately called a bridge, rather than a proof.

4. Affective bridge-building

Lots of people ask the question “Why should I believe?”, but are neither concerned about, nor moved by claims that Christianity is the truth. Their question may have a fairly crude underlying message – “What’s in it for me?” – or it may be more sophisticated.

While we do not want to offer the gospel merely as another form of self-fulfillment, it is important to show that because we speak for the Creator, his message addresses the most profound hopes and fears of his creatures; that is, it is effective.

It appeals to their hearts.

Most human longings are distorted forms of the valid desires of creatures made by God, be they longings for justice, an improved environment, love, significance or rest. Our good desires have been distorted terribly by separating them from our relationship with God. The ways which humans pursue these desires are both evil and useless, yet behind the distortion is a longing which only relationship with God through Jesus can fulfil. In phase four of apologetics, we seek to demonstrate how only a relationship with Jesus can fulfil human longings.

Many people in our society do not care about truth. Rather than attempting to drag them on to our traditional apologetic ground of arguing about truth, we can find their interests and use this to appeal to them. Someone may never be interested in why the New Testament is a trustworthy historical document, but they will have other interests and desires which the gospel does address. We can appeal to these areas. This is an area in which we need to do more thinking.

Traditional apologetics has been too academic, and has centred almost entirely on truth claims. An apologetic which works in contemporary society will answer the question “Why should I believe?” at more than the level of truth. It will build more than one bridge.

Endnotes

N, Geisler, *Christian Apologetics*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1976), pp. 264-5.

J.W.Sire, *The Universe Next Door*, (Leicester: IVP, 2nd Ed., 1988),