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what about evangelism?



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in the first of a new series, **Chris Knight** defines apologetics

the evangelism command

At the beginning of the book of Acts, Luke records the final words of Jesus to his disciples in his resurrection body: 'You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth' (Acts 1:8). Matthew 28:19 clarifies exactly what this Great Commission is: the witness of all Christians is intended to 'make disciples of all nations'. Evangelism - sharing the good news with others - is therefore a key element of being a Christian. But, as we know, it's not always as straightforward as presenting the gospel to our friend and shortly afterwards leading them in a prayer of repentance. Evangelism can take many forms. It's certainly about sharing the good news, but it's not just about that. And we are not commanded just to 'convert' people, but given the rather more difficult task of making them disciples - a longer term goal of bringing Christians to a mature and lasting faith.

The goal of evangelism is to be a witness to the life-changing forgiveness that is available to each person through Jesus. Where we can share that directly, and people are open to hearing and receiving it, then we rejoice that God has so prepared their hearts. But sometimes we need to prepare the way before sharing the gospel directly.

'no' to evangelism

When people don't respond, or raise serious questions, or perhaps even show that they do not have the faintest interest in what we are saying, then we need to adjust our evangelism style. We have a message to proclaim. But if, for

whatever reason, people won't hear or won't believe that message, then we need to be prepared to defend it or prepare the way for them to hear it. We need to recognise what lies behind people's 'No' to the gospel. 'No' can mean many things, such as:

- 'No - I don't believe it's true'
- 'No - my religion is true, not yours'
- 'No - I've been hurt by the Church / Christians before and am not prepared to go through that again'
- 'No - I'm not prepared to change my lifestyle so I'm not prepared to consider whether Christianity is true or not'
- 'No - I hate God because he let my best friend die of cancer aged 15'
- 'No - I enjoy my life as it is. Why would I want to change?'

Our evangelism needs to be different depending on what sort of 'no' we hear.

In some cases, your friend may have some form of barrier to hearing and responding to the gospel. They may not be ready to hear the gospel directly - you need to take time to help them see the need in their life before doing so.

- Perhaps their life is comfortable and they see no need to think about God. **Christianity is irrelevant.**
- Perhaps they are a Muslim or Scientologist or hold some other religious or atheistic view of the world and confront you with arguments and questions. **Christianity is untrue.**
- Perhaps events in the past have deeply hurt or upset your friend. They blame God or the Church for the suffering they have experienced or seen close at hand.

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If Christianity is true, then they hate God and despise Christians. **Christianity is undesirable.**

Clearly there are as many individual situations as there are individuals. But these three categories cover many of the reasons people will not (or cannot) hear the gospel. So what do we do? Must we simply accept that they are not ready to hear the gospel, that they are the wrong type of soil, so we must move on to better soil and leave them to God's care?

I don't believe that the New Testament allows us to do that. We have been given a task: 'Go and make disciples of all nations' - but we are not specifically told how to do it. We cannot cop out by saying that the Holy Spirit is the one who convicts the sinner (John 16:8) and so once we have presented the gospel, we have played our part. There is no indication in the New Testament that our responsibility is merely to present the gospel and then give up if there is no response. In fact the opposite is true as we will see below.

the evangelism spectrum

If we do present the gospel and it is flatly rejected, I suggest we need to do two things. Firstly, we need to be certain that what we presented **was** the gospel - was it 'Mere Christianity' (as C S Lewis would have called it)? Have we instead been talking about the reliability of the Bible, or the date of creation or the problems with society? If we have been presenting the gospel, then we can move on, secondly, to **defend** the gospel message that has been rejected.

At this point we move onto a different form of evangelism. Sometimes (perhaps most of the time), this is where we need to start. Evangelism covers a spectrum of approaches, although these



really merge into each other (see diagram). At one end of the spectrum we **proclaim** the gospel to others as truth, in the centre we **persuade** others that the gospel is true and at the other end we need to show that everyone needs the gospel and to do this we need to **prepare** them to consider the gospel. The goal is always to remove any

preparing the ground

Seeking to **prepare** others to consider the gospel is important where the gospel is seen as **irrelevant**. If the gospel is true, then all other worldviews are not. They may have elements of truth, but there will also be elements of half-truths and falsehood. By exposing inconsistencies in other worldviews, and showing their inability to explain certain aspects of our human experiences or to satisfy human needs and longings, we clear the soil of anything that will prevent the seed from growth.

Like real gardening, this can be hard work. The place to start, however, is with our friend. They are our very best resource on what they believe. Ask them questions; find out exactly what they believe and why. How did they come to believe it was true? Had they considered other beliefs before? Their beliefs may turn out not to be quite as straightforward as the books would suggest. As well as questions, we may need to find out more about our friend's beliefs by reading. Don't be afraid to read books supporting your friend's beliefs - ask them what they would recommend. They will probably be more than happy to lend you the book! Read Christian books on it too, so you can benefit from the hard work of other Christians, but ideally don't let these be the only books you read. Reading the books your friend recommends does two things - it shows your friend that you are serious about understanding what they believe and that you want to discuss it with them. It may also, later on, allow you to recommend a book for them to read!

If your friend is a Scientologist or a Muslim or a Mormon, this is relatively straightforward, but what if your friend believes 'nothing' - they

barriers that might prevent people arriving at the cross of Christ where they can properly hear and accept his claim to be Lord and Saviour of all. We are not seeking to win arguments, but to 'win souls' (Proverbs 11:30). If our friend gives nothing more than intellectual assent to Christian beliefs, they are not a Christian and evangelism is not yet over. Commitment to Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour is the goal - a recognition of the truth of the gospel and what that demands of their life. Hence all our interaction with others needs to be covered in **prayer** - prayer that in our friendship, evangelism and apologetics we may be working alongside what the Holy Spirit is already doing in the lives of others.

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just want to enjoy life while they have it. This can be more difficult as there is seemingly nothing to investigate and engage with. But your friend is again your best information source. What are their values? What motivates them? What annoys them? What frustrates them? What TV programmes and films do they watch? What music do they listen to? Points of contact, points of agreement, points of disagreement - all these can lead to useful conversations to build up a picture of a worldview with its points of agreement with your own but also with its inconsistencies and drawbacks - which you can then highlight.

We might say that we are seeking to shake people out of their complacency - seeking to show them that their current beliefs are inconsistent or don't meet all their needs, preparing them for considering the claims of Christianity.

persuading others

Seeking to **persuade** others is important where Christianity is seen as **untrue** or **undesirable**. Later articles will address specific questions and issues that are commonly raised as barriers to belief. **Preparing** the ground is more about removing alternative belief systems and helping a person to realise unmet needs in their life; **persuading** is more about showing that Christianity can meet those needs **because it is true**. It may be providing positive reasons for believing in the resurrection of Jesus, for trusting the Bible, for belief in God, or it may be answering objections to Christian belief raised by suffering, the behaviour of the Church in the Crusades or the belief that 'faith' is necessarily blind. If **preparing** is about clearing the soil, **persuading** is about showing that the Christian seed is worth planting!

apologetics for all

What I have called preparing and persuading are, together, a 'defence' of the gospel. In both cases we seek to encourage others to be prepared to listen seriously to the proclamation of the good news of Christ. The technical term in English for this is 'apologetics' - a word that is derived from the Greek term '*apologia*', which was used to describe a lawyer's 'defence' of his client in court. Paul uses the word in this way in the New Testament. After he was arrested in Jerusalem, he says 'Brothers and fathers, listen now to my defence' (Acts 22:1). The Roman Governor of Judea, Festus, uses the term in the same way in Acts 25:16. In his letter to the Philippians, Paul twice talks of his work in defending the gospel (Philippians 1:7, 16 - in the first case he talks of 'defending and confirming' the gospel), where the Greek word is again '*apologia*'.

Thus Christian apologetics is the task of defending the Christian faith, by using arguments and evidence to show that it is true - just as you might in a court of law - and where necessary showing that other belief systems are false.

There is no hard and fast separation between preparing and persuading, or between these and proclaiming the gospel. Presenting the gospel passionately and effectively may well include various apologetics arguments within it. However, it is clearly preferable not to raise objections which are not already issues for your listeners. This may distract them by diverting consideration away from the gospel message.

Don't raise problems - respond to them!

Apologetics is also helpful, of course, for Christians - it can be a positive addition as we pastor and nurture the growth of new and old disciples. Apologetics can encourage, reassure

and prepare each of us to speak to others of why we believe what we do. Christians have doubts and questions as well - apologetics can help to dispel and answer these (see diagram on page 14).

apologetics in the New Testament

Paul's evangelism to the Jews and Gentiles differed. To the Jews, Paul went to the synagogues to persuade the Jews that Jesus was the Messiah (Acts 17:1-4). On three Sabbath days, Paul went to the synagogue to 'proclaim Jesus' by 'reasoning from the Scriptures', 'explaining' and 'proving' his message. Paul, however, was not preaching at the Jews; he was interacting with them, engaging in dialogue (the literal meaning of the word translated 'reasoning'), a two way exchange of ideas and arguments - a conversation. His message proved persuasive, as verse four shows.

To the Gentiles, Paul again 'was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection' (Acts 17:18), but in this case was engaging with Epicurean and Stoic philosophers in the market place. He no longer starts with the Hebrew Scriptures. This common foundation with his Jewish listeners would mean nothing to the pagan philosophers. So Paul starts where they are - with their gods and their altars, even quoting their poets - preparing them to hear the gospel.

We are given little more than a summary of what Paul actually said, but it is clear that to the Jews he was declaring Jesus to be the Christ (Acts 17:3) but not using that Jewish concept for his Greek listeners, rather talking about judgment (Acts 17:31). The lesson for us is to know our friends. Who are we talking to? What do they believe? What can we agree with in their belief system? What do we need to challenge?

key points

- Apologetics is one aspect of evangelism
- Proclaim the gospel where appropriate; prepare friends to hear it and persuade them it is true where necessary
- Don't raise problems; respond to them
- Non-Christians may see Christianity as irrelevant, untrue or undesirable
- Your friend is the best source of information on what they believe and why. Ask them!
- Evangelism covers a spectrum of approaches: proclamation, persuasion and preparation
- Everyone can and should do evangelism including apologetics
- Cover all evangelism and apologetics with prayer

further resources:

- Peter May 'Dialogue in Evangelism' bit.ly/eNqSwl
- Tom Price 'Persuasive Evangelism - Apologetics' bit.ly/nOB3JA
- Nick Pollard 'Where do I Start?' bit.ly/M5VNS6

How can we best present the gospel to them? It is not our responsibility to ensure that our friend responds - but it is our responsibility to seek to present the gospel faithfully, avoiding jargon, so that it will be heard and understood.

apologetics for all

Apologetics, then, is a form of evangelism. Evangelism is something that all Christians are called to do - and can do. Apologetics is also something that all Christians can and should do, as we will see in the next article, where we will also think further about the way in which we should do apologetics. Later articles will then look in more detail at specific apologetics issues. ■

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