

# apologetics 2

always be prepared

Chris Knight on how we 'do' apologetics

In the first article of this series,<sup>1</sup> I suggested that apologetics is a form of evangelism. Now we will consider a couple of more general issues about how we might 'do' apologetics and whether we all really need to be involved with it.

We have already seen that Paul 'defended' the gospel on his missionary journeys. But in the biblical passage that is probably most cited to support apologetics, all Christians are commanded to be ready with their apologetics:

*'In your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience...'* (1 Peter 3:15-16).

We could perhaps loosely translate that as 'always being prepared to use your apologetics with anyone who asks you'. Now you might reply that this is all very well, but you've not studied apologetics and you don't know how to answer

the difficult questions that people ask. It's true that some study can help, but if you think about it, you most probably already have a good initial response to questions people ask you.

## your own apologetics

We all differ in how we became Christians. For some it might have been a specific time of commitment. For others, there might never have been a time you can remember when you did not consider yourself a Christian. But we all have a story to tell of our journey to Christ and why we are Christians now. It might be a story of discussions long into the night concerning the existence of God or the resurrection of Jesus. It may be a story of the knowledge of God's comfort through difficult times in your life. Or a story of a struggle to give up a life centred on self-gratification for true freedom in commitment to Christ.



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Whatever your story, you could give various responses to the question: 'Why are you a Christian?' Stop for a moment and consider what your reply might be if you were asked that question in the coming week. What would you want to emphasise? What else would you consider important enough to mention?

Your own testimony is a form of apologetics. It gives some of the reasons why you continue to hold to 'the hope that is in you,' as Peter put it in his letter. Your primary defence of what you believe is the story of your own journey to Christ - your testimony to biblical truth.

If you haven't thought about it for a while, why not think back and put together that story now? It may help to write it down and keep it with your Bible or prayer diary. Writing it down forces us to think it through and express it in a reasonably coherent fashion - which will help as we seek to relate it to others. If we're nervous about talking about our faith, this can be a helpful first step to take in. Make sure that your testimony gives reasons - the 'Why?' you came to Christ, not just the 'How?'

## when doubts arise

Not only is your own testimony one possible starting point for talking with others, it is also helpful in talking to yourself! We need sometimes to remind ourselves why we believe, especially when doubts arise.

I read a lot of arguments against Christianity and occasionally a little voice in my head seems to say: 'There, I told you it was all nonsense. Just look at that argument - how can you reply to that?' I don't always have an immediate reply, and it would be easy to succumb to doubt. It's

times like that when I return to my own testimony, the reasons that I believe Christianity to be true. My own words speak back to me - because it's very easy to forget *why* we believe *what* we believe. I think many people start to lose their faith when they come across an argument against Christianity they can't answer. A hint of doubt arises, growing to take centre stage, sometimes supported by other arguments, until it *seems* that there is simply no possible reply - Christianity must be false.

Consider a book that argues that Francis Bacon wrote 'Shakespeare's' plays. The arguments may seem convincing and difficult to refute. But I would not want to come to a decision on this matter by relying exclusively on books that argued for Bacon's authorship - I would expect those books to present the arguments for this as powerfully as they could. Before coming to a decision on the matter, I would want to read books on both sides of the argument or talk to people with differing beliefs on the topic, preferably those who were passionate about their belief as well as rational and evidence-based.

Similarly, when we come across an argument against Christianity that seems convincing or that we can't answer, we need to remind ourselves that there is more to this issue than our lack of an answer. One argument against a belief does not automatically overshadow the weight of evidence in its favour. At the very least our testimony reminds us that there is a wider picture to consider. Reminding ourselves of the reasons that we became, and why we remain, a Christian reassures us that we need not doubt because of arguments to which we have no immediate response.

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If we have good reasons, reinforced over a long period, to trust in Christ as our Lord and Saviour, then any counter-argument, experience or feeling that suggests otherwise must be balanced against all our previous reasons to believe.

My favourite definition of faith comes from CS Lewis: '*Faith... is the art of holding on to things your reason has once accepted, in spite of your changing moods.*'<sup>2</sup>

Lewis continues: 'We have to be continually reminded of what we believe', which is why he wisely advocates daily prayer and meditation on the truths of Christianity. 'Beliefs', he says, 'must be fed.'<sup>3</sup>

Lewis' definition of faith is so important. We believe that Christianity is true on the basis of truth: true evidence; true arguments; true experiences; true transformation of our lives and those of others; true Scriptures; etc. We must not forget it.

Although I believe that atheistic arguments can be rejected as reasons to doubt because we have better reasons to believe, I am not suggesting we ignore these arguments. Think them through with wise Christian friends; consult Christian books or websites; find answers. The next time that particular argument occurs, you will have a good response ready and waiting - or know where to go to find it. In subsequent articles, I will consider a number of the common arguments that crop up, but they will say little that is new. The truth, as they say, is already out there!

Whatever you do, don't imagine that any atheistic argument you come across is so good that there can be no adequate response. Certainly there will be questions we can't *fully* resolve at the moment, but that doesn't negate the evidence and clarity we do have on the truth of Christianity.

## difficult conversations

If someone asks 'So, why are you a Christian?' your testimony may serve as a good starting point for a response. But if someone asks you a 'difficult' question, does your testimony help? Consider this conversation:

**SCEPTIC:** 'Don't you think the Big Bang shows us how the universe started? We don't need God to explain why we're here.'

**CHRISTIAN:** 'I must admit I don't know much about the Big Bang. Let me think about that one and perhaps we can discuss it later. But don't you think there are any reasons to believe in God then?'

First of all, if you don't know something, admit it. Your discussion will be far more fruitful if you go away, find out more and *then* discuss it. Secondly, you're still responding to the question. Your friend is giving a reason to believe God doesn't exist. You're trying to find out more behind what he's saying by asking your question. Has he considered this issue in the light of reasons *for* believing in God as well as reasons *against*? Rather than launch into your reasons *for* believing, you put the ball back into his court. You're at the stage of finding out more. What does he mean? Has he really thought these things through?

**SCEPTIC:** 'I've never heard any good reasons to believe in God!'

**CHRISTIAN:** 'Well I wouldn't be a Christian if I didn't think there were good reasons. But have you ever seriously considered the evidence for God?'

**SCEPTIC:** 'Not for a long time, but it never seemed very convincing so it seems pointless to go over it again.'

**CHRISTIAN:** 'But would you be willing to think about it again? I can tell you why I believe...'

At this stage, he can either say 'Yes' and you can continue the conversation from what you do know, rather than from what you don't. Or he can say 'No' and seem less 'open-minded' than you are (you've already said you'll think about the Big Bang). Even then, you've still got the possibility of resuming the conversation when you've had a chance to think more about the Big Bang.

## life as apologetics

Apologetics is about more than reasons, evidence and arguments. It is also about lifestyle and who we are, in Christ. Before people hear our words, they encounter our life. The way we speak needs to be consistent with *what* we speak. In the passage quoted above, Peter also tells us *how* to deliver our 'defence'. In fact he gives two of the most important points to remember as we seek to help others see the truth of Christianity. Firstly, we need to honour Christ the Lord in our hearts. If we're doing that, our lives will display something different to the 'world', leading people to ask all sorts of questions, including the reason for our hope in life. Secondly, our conversations need to exhibit 'gentleness and respect', which in difficult areas of disagreement is not always apparent in the world. Even when there is anger directed towards us, we need to recall that 'A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger' (Proverbs 15:1).

A fair number of emails that I receive at *bethinking.org* challenge claims made on the website, sometimes in very angry tones. But after I have responded, hopefully with 'gentleness and respect', a significant number of people start their response with an apology for the tone of their previous email. I believe it is much easier to respond to an email in gentle and respectful tones than during a conversation

## key points

- Always be prepared to defend your beliefs
- Your testimony is important
  - for others and for you
- Write down *why* you're a Christian
- Don't let a single argument disturb you
  - consider the wider issues
- Find answers
- Feed your beliefs

## further reading

- Os Guinness: 'The Essence of Apologetics'  
<http://bit.ly/6XaAOC>
- Chris Knight: 'Derren Brown - Tricks of the Mind'  
<http://bit.ly/PHPXdX>
- Michael Ramsden: 'Conversational Apologetics'  
<http://bit.ly/WvmyEc>

where anger can seem much more personal. But we are seeking to win a hearing for the gospel, not to win an argument. 'Gentleness and respect' are vital elements in that process.

## think and do

You may find it helpful to recall some conversations about faith that you've had. What happened? On reflection, how might you have been better prepared?

What are the commonest questions about Christianity you meet? What questions do you most dread? Write them all down, adding your thoughts about responses. Update these as you come across further ideas. ▀

*Next time we will look at one of the most difficult questions...*

## REFERENCES

1. Knight C. What about evangelism? *Nucleus*. Autumn 2012:13-17
2. Lewis CS. *Mere Christianity*. London: Fontana, 1960:121
3. *Ibid*:122