

Six Enemies Of Apologetic Engagement

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Introduction

The evangelical world today suffers from apologetic anemia. Despite the fact that holy Scripture calls believers to give a reason for the hope we have in Christ (1 Peter 3:15; see also Jude 3), we sadly lack a public voice for truth and reason in the marketplace of ideas. We do not have a strong intellectual presence in popular or academic culture (although some areas, such as philosophy, are more influenced by evangelicals than others). The reasons for this anemia are multidimensional and complex.

Three recent books explore the lack of a "Christian mind" in contemporary evangelicalism, and I highly recommend them. Mark Noll's *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Eerdmans, 1994) explores the historical roots of evangelical anti-intellectualism. Os Guinness's *Fit Bodies, Fat Minds* (Baker Books, 1994), discusses some of the historical problems and also outlines what a Christian mind should look like. J.P. Moreland's *Love Your God with all of Your Mind* (Navpress, 1997) explains why Christians don't think, develops a biblical theology of the mind, and offers helpful apologetic arguments and strategies to empower the church intellectually.

My modest purpose is briefly to lay out six factors that illegitimately inhibit apologetic engagement today. If these barriers are removed, our apologetic witness may grow into what it should be in Christ.

1. Indifference

Too many Christians don't seem to care that Christianity is routinely ridiculed as outdated, irrational, and narrow-minded in our culture. They may complain that this "offends" them (just as everyone else is complaining that one thing or another "offends" them), but they do little to counteract the charges by offering a defense of

the Christian world view in a variety of settings. Yet Scripture *commands* all Christians to have a reason for the hope that is within them and to present this with gentleness and respect to unbelievers (1 Peter 3:15). Our attitude should be that of the Apostle Paul who was "greatly distressed" when he beheld the idolatry of sophisticated Athens. This zeal for the truth of God led him into a fruitful apologetic encounter with the thinkers gathered to debate new ideas (see Acts 17). It should for us as well. Just as God "so loved the world" that he sent Jesus to set us right with God (John 3:16), Jesus' disciples should so love the world that they endeavor to reach the lost by presenting the Gospel and answering objections to the Christian faith (Acts 17:18).

2. Irrationalism

For some Christians, faith means belief in the absence of evidence and argument. Worse yet, for some faith means belief *in spite of* evidence to the contrary. The more irrational our beliefs, the better--the more "spiritual" they are. Although Paul teaches in 1 Corinthians 1 and 2 that God makes foolish "the wisdom of this world" (because it is false wisdom), God's revelation is not irrational; nor must belief in it be irrationally held. {1} God does not require us to suspend our critical faculties in order to believe what he has made known. Through Isaiah, God declares to Israel, "Come let us reason together" (Isaiah 1:18). Jesus commanded us to love God with all of our minds (Matthew 22:37). When Christians opt for irrationalism, they become just another "religious option," and are classified along with Heaven's Gate, the Flat Earth Society, and other intellectually impaired groups. In the wake of the Heaven's Gate suicide, several major magazines such as *Esquire*, *Newsweek*, and *US News and World Report* claimed that the faith of those who ended their life in accordance with Marshall Applewhite's science fiction religion were no stranger than Christians, who believe ridiculous things as well. Sadly, the behavior of some Christians gives impetus to such accusations.

3. Ignorance

Many Christians are not aware of the tremendous intellectual resources available to defend "the

faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints" (Jude 3). This is largely because many major churches and parachurch organizations virtually ignore apologetics. One major campus ministry with a fine history and an otherwise splendid program offers no materials to help students deal with the unbelief emanating from their secular professors. Few evangelical sermons ever address the evidence for the existence of God, the resurrection of Jesus, the justice of hell, the supremacy of Christ, or the logical problems with non-Christian worldviews. Christian bestsellers, with rare exceptions, indulge in groundless apocalyptic speculations, exalt Christian celebrities (whose characters often do not fit their notoriety), and revel in how-to methods. You can tell much about a movement by what it reads, and by what it does not read.

4. Cowardice

In our pluralistic culture, a "live and let live" attitude is the norm, and a capitulation to social pressure haunts evangelicalism and drains its convictions. Too many evangelicals are more concerned about being "nice" and "tolerant" than being biblical or faithful to the exclusive Gospel found in their Bibles. Not enough evangelicals are willing to present and defend their faith in challenging situations, whether at school, at work, or in other public settings. The temptation is to privatize faith, to insulate and isolate it from public life entirely. Yes, we are Christians (in our hearts), but we have difficulty engaging anyone with what we believe and why we believe it. This is nothing less than cowardice and a betrayal of what we say we believe. Consider Paul's inspired request for prayer and his admonition to us: "Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful. And pray for us, too that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ for which I am in chains. Pray that I may proclaim it clearly as I should. Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone" (Colossians 4:2-6).

We may experience rejection; but Jesus called those who are persecuted for his name's sake "blessed." "Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil

against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you" (Matthew 5:11-12).

The Apostle Peter echoes his Master: "If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you" (1 Peter 4:14).

On the other hand, when the Holy Spirit blesses our efforts, people will respond with interest and even saving faith (Romans 1:16). We must never forget that Jesus has all authority in heaven and on earth, and that he has commissioned us to declare and defend his Gospel (Matthew 28:18-20).

5. Arrogance and intellectual vanity

At the other end of the spectrum of error lies the arrogance of the know-it-all apologist, who is more interested in displaying his or her arsenal of arguments than in defending the truth in a godly manner. The besetting sin of apologetics is intellectual pride, and it must be avoided at all costs. The truth we defend is a gift of grace, not our intellectual achievement. We develop our apologetic skills to sanctify ourselves in the truth, to win souls for Christ, and to glorify God. We must "speak the truth in love" (Eph. 4:15). Truth without love is arrogance; love without truth is sentimentality. {2}

Arrogance also occurs when some apologists accuse other believers of heresy without sufficient evidence. Paul told the early church leaders to expect heresy in its midst and to be on their guard against it (Acts 20:28-31). We should do the same. However, we must be vigilant not to slander fellow Christians or to assume the worst about them. I know of this error first-hand, having myself once been accused of being New Age because a critic horribly misread one portion of one my anti-New Age book, *Unmasking the New Age!* Let's not waste our apologetic energies attacking other believers when real heretics and unbelievers cry out for refutation and correction.

6. Superficial techniques or schlock apologetics

Some who get excited about apologetics may

become content with superficial answers to difficult intellectual questions. Our culture revels in rapid responses to most anything, and technique is king. Some Christians memorize pat answers to apologetic questions--such as the problem of evil or the creation/evolution controversy--which they dispense without a proper engagement of the issues and without an empathetic concern for the soul that raises the question. I once saw a little book called something like *The Handy, Dandy Evolution Refuter*. Yes, macro-evolution is false, and good arguments have been raised against it from both nature and Scripture, but the matter is not as simplistic as the title of that book makes it sound. {3} Apologetics must be done with intellectual integrity.

Francis Schaeffer's apologetic motto was that we must give "honest answers to honest questions." First, we must really *hear* the question being asked or the objection being raised. We must get inside the minds of those who are giving reasons for not following Christ. Each person is different, not matter how common some skeptical objections may be. Don't reduce people to clichés.

Second, respond to what you hear. Don't answer a question that was not asked. Such a superficial approach will not impress the thoughtful unbeliever. If you cannot come up with a sound answer to the objection at the time, don't try to hide your ignorance or inability. Honestly admitting your limitations is better than giving a shoddy answer. Tell the person that it is a good point and you need to think more about it. Christianity is absolutely true; but this doesn't imply that any one Christian can handle absolutely any objection raised against it. We should avoid apologetic techniques, and instead develop intellectual resources and cultivate real dialogue with unbelievers. {4}

Walter Martin rightly said that the evangelical church was a sleeping giant, and he endeavored mightily to awaken it to its God-given potential to present the Gospel and defend it against skeptical and cultic objections. With this legacy in mind, may we rekindle this vision and find the passion and wisdom to put it into effect through the power of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:8).

About the Author

Douglas Groothuis, PH.D. teaches philosophy at Denver Seminary and is the author of seven books, the most recent being *The Soul in Cyberspace* (Baker, 1997).

Endnotes

 {1} For an explanation of biblical passages that supposedly teach that faith is not reasonable, see J.P. Moreland, *Love God With All of Your Mind* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1997), 57-61

 {2} On this see, Douglas Groothuis, "Apologetics, Truth, and Humility," *Christian Research Journal* (Spring 1992), 7.

 {3} For a compelling introduction to this issue, see Philip Johnson, *Defeating Darwinism by Opening Minds* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997).

 {4} See *Dialogical Apologetics* by David Clark (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1993).