



What is "Apologetics"?

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The Apostle Peter wrote that all Christians need to be ready to give an "apology" (Gk *Apologia*) or defence of their Christian hope to everyone who asks them, adding importantly, that it should be done with gentleness and respect (1Pet3:15). This therefore is not an activity just for those who are good at it. We must *all* be ready to give an answer to *everyone*. An apology means a defence or answer to justify certain actions or beliefs (e.g. Acts 22:1). It is commonly misunderstood because it is thought to always mean an admission of fault, failure or regret. A statement for the defence in a law court, for instance, is technically an "apology", but certainly not an admission of guilt!

But what does this mean in practice and how did it work out for the apostles themselves? Certainly they understood that evangelism was a spiritual activity in which the Holy Spirit empowered their speech and brought conviction and repentance to those who responded. Only God can bring individuals to new life through the "word of truth" (Eph 1:13) which is the Gospel. However, Christians are the means of proclaiming that word of truth and we need to be quite clear what God expects of us in the way we present it. What example, then, have the apostles left us?

How should we proclaim the Gospel?

The key word that describes Paul's activity is that he "reasoned" with people. So, in the Jewish synagogue, "according to his custom, he reasoned with them from the Scriptures" (Acts 17:2). In Athens he not only "reasoned" with Jews and Gentiles in the synagogue but also "reasoned" in the market place with whoever was there (Acts

17: 17). He did the same in Corinth, "reasoning" with Jews and Greeks (Acts 18:4). Later in Ephesus, he spent three months "reasoning" in the synagogue, then for two years in a secular hall "reasoning daily" (Acts 19: 9,10). He adopted the same approach wherever he went.

The Greek word for "reason" means dialogue. Instead of giving sermons six foot above contradiction, Paul engaged in a two-way exchange. With the Jews, he discussed the meaning of the Old Testament writings. With the philosophers, he discussed their beliefs, challenging their assumptions. In other words, he started where they were. It was the same approach used by Philip, when the Ethiopian invited him aboard his chariot (Acts 8:30ff). "Do you understand what you are reading?" Philip asked. They read the passage together, and the Ethiopian asked him questions. Then Philip "beginning from this Scripture, told him the good news about Jesus." Philip did not confront the Ethiopian. With 'gentleness and respect', he came alongside and sat next to him shoulder to shoulder. Entering into his thinking, he allowed the truth about God to confront them both.

As Christianity spread from the Jews to the Greeks, it faced new challenges. The Greeks were not familiar with the Old Testament, so they could not begin to discuss it. Instead, the evangelists studied their culture and started from there (Acts 17:16, 22, 23, 28). Paul says he became "all things to all men". He became a Jew to reach the Jews and a Gentile to reach the Gentiles in order to win them (1Cor 9:20-22).

Other words fill out the picture. This 'dialogue' involved "explaining", "giving evidence", "proclaiming" and "persuading" (Acts 17:3,4). With the philosophers, he was "disputing" (Acts 17:18). In Corinth, he was "trying to persuade" Jews and Greeks (1Cor 18:4). In Ephesus he was "arguing persuasively about the kingdom of God" (Acts 19:8). Paul was "discussing" with Felix the Governor (Acts 24:25), while King Agrippa thought Paul was trying to "persuade" him to become a Christian. In Rome he was "explaining", "testifying" and "trying to convince them about Jesus" (Acts 28:23).

What happened at Corinth?

Some have argued that Paul failed at Athens, so at Corinth subsequently he changed his approach to a simple, unargued proclamation. On this basis, the Athenian address was recorded as a detailed example of how not to do evangelism! But there is not even a hint of that. This muddle comes from a failure to understand the background. The Corinthians had specific expectations of their public speakers and Paul did not meet their requirements. They looked for someone with an impressive physical presence, who would give a bravado performance. The audience would tell the speaker what subject he should speak on, and they expected him to use fine words and rhetorical language. Paul was a big disappointment to them. He was physically weak, he was only prepared to talk about Christ and his language was ordinary. "I did not come with eloquence... I resolved to know nothing except Jesus Christ...I came in weakness and fear." (1Cor 2:1-5).

Far from adopting a different approach, it was to the Corinthians that he wrote of "pulling down strongholds. We demolish arguments and every lofty idea raised up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ." (2Cor10:5). The Jews in Corinth complained that he was "persuading people to worship God." (Acts 18:13)

Dialogue then for Paul was a lively exchange of views, in which he presented the gospel. By engaging with their culture, he challenged their assumptions, clarified the issues, stormed their defences, provoked their questions, addressed their doubts and presented the gospel in a compelling manner. This sort of "inter-faith" dialogue was not merely about finding common ground or seeking mutual understanding. It was far more than that. Paul engaged in dialogue in order to win his hearers to Christ.

Defence or attack?

Paul and his colleagues, then, were not just waiting around to see if anyone attacked their views! Nor were they engaged in dry, academic defences of obscure, intellectual points. Their 'defence' was dynamic. They made the running, set the agenda and took the dialogue to unbelievers. In cricketing terms, they weren't just defending their stumps from hostile bowling, using

a straight bat played off the back foot. They were heading down the wicket towards the bowler and were playing their shots. They were looking to score runs, often playing bold strokes that sent the gospel ball hurtling towards the boundary.

The New Testament does not distinguish between apologetics and evangelism as though they were different activities. Little enough is said about "the evangelist", but not a mention is made of "the apologist"! They had one approach in evangelism and its central feature was two-way dialogue. They listened seriously to what people were saying. They engaged with the cultural world of their hearers. They tried to understand their difficulties. Tuning in and finding their cultural and intellectual level, they set out to demolish opposing arguments before presenting the gospel in a convincing way, in terms their hearers could understand. The account of Paul at Athens is described in detail as the classic example for us to follow (Acts 17:22-31).

Paul summed up their approach to the Corinthians, "Knowing what it is to fear the Lord, we try to persuade others." (2 Cor 5:11). Unargued evangelism had no place on their agenda. Persuasive evangelism is the only example they have set us.

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