

THE TABLE BRIEFING: DIALOGICAL APOLOGETICS AND DIFFICULT SPIRITUAL CONVERSATIONS

Darrell L. Bock and Mikel Del Rosario

AN OLD INDIAN PROVERB SAYS, “You don’t cut off a man’s nose and give him a rose to smell.” In a Table episode called “Cross-cultural Evangelism and Apologetics,” Ramesh Richard, professor of global theological engagement and pastoral ministries at Dallas Theological Seminary, applied this saying to a defense of the faith, observing that in the midst of discussing God, Jesus, or the Bible with skeptical neighbors, some believers seem to “destroy them in the process of contest and debate.”

Apologetists often cite 1 Peter 3:15, focusing on the command to be “prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you,” but many seem to neglect the rest of the command, “yet do it with gentleness and respect” (ESV). As a result, apologetics training usually focuses on philosophical, theological, and historical issues, while less attention is given to the personal aspects of practical engagement. How can we approach difficult spiritual conversations? A number of Table podcasts have explored the concept of dialogical apologetics—a practical approach that sees apologetic engagement not as debate but as genuine dialogue.

In this briefing, we share four key lessons: (1) See apologetics

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as ministry; (2) engage in dialogue, not debate; (3) consider a different kind of persuasion; and (4) always reflect God's character.

SEE APOLOGETICS AS MINISTRY

While some Christians seem reluctant to discuss their faith with their skeptical friends, others seem all too eager to dismantle objections and refute challenges. What attitude should we have as we prepare for difficult spiritual conversations? How can we alleviate some of the tension and avoid becoming defensive? On an episode called "How to Engage in Spiritual Conversations," Darrell Bock talked with Houston Baptist University assistant professor of apologetics Mary Jo Sharp about these questions:

Bock: When [some Christians] get the opportunity to talk about Christ . . . they say, "I'm going to stand up for God and make the case," and they tend to [enter] almost like a bull in a china shop. How do you advise people to walk into those conversations? And what should they seek to do in starting off?

Sharp: My goal, before I roll into a conversation, is to actually care about people. The first thing I want to demonstrate to a person is that I care about them. So, what we're about to discuss is all wrapped up in "Do I really want to serve this person?" I've had atheists tell me they felt like Christians made them a project. Like they just wanted to throw their [talking] points at them, and if they weren't ready to accept those points, they just walk away. That makes [the atheist] feel like a project rather than a person. I want to avoid that.

First, [we need to] know what we believe. [Many Christians] don't talk to other people about their faith because they don't know their faith. They are not trained in essential Christian doctrine. They're not comfortable in their Christian skin. . . . If you talk to me long enough, [you will get] *Star Wars*, the Bible, *Lord of the Rings*, or *The Chronicles of Narnia*, because that's my skin. That's what's going to come out of me, because that's what I care about. So, we have to . . . know what we believe and why we believe it. Early on in Christianity, I felt intimidated to share my faith with others, because I didn't know why I believed it. And that's just vital to having an effective conversation where you don't get defensive—knowing your own beliefs.

Before speaking, then, Christians should see apologetic en-

agement as ministry and recognize the value of remaining calm in difficult spiritual conversations. Approaching these encounters with a desire to minister can reduce the tension and help us avoid becoming defensive or argumentative. Confidence in the truth of the Christian worldview should allow us to minister to others by listening to their views and the stories behind them.

ENGAGE IN DIALOGUE, NOT DEBATE

Defenders of the faith must embrace the kind of apologetics that is relational, tailoring the way we build a case for Christianity to a shifting culture and preparing for a holistic, person-centered dialogue rather than a solely issue-centered debate. While the truth has not changed, challenges to the Christian worldview have evolved. We need a new generation of apologists who are sensitive to current conversations around issues like transgenderism, religious freedom, and the intersection of faith and vocation. On an episode called “Truth, Love, and Defending the Faith,” Sean McDowell, associate professor of Christian apologetics at Biola University, discussed with Bock and Mikel Del Rosario the needed next generation of apologists.

McDowell: Truth remains the same, but culture changes. . . . A new kind of apologist is [a Christian who says], “Let’s take stock, because a lot of things have changed around us today. Make sure that we’re communicating the gospel and defending the faith in a way that’s God-honoring and effective in our culture today.”

Bock: We’ve had a kind of cultural net that was Judeo-Christian wrapped around most of the Western world. That net is gone. [In the past], you could assume certain things in your conversation that you can no longer assume. People had a belief in God. People had at least a healthy respect for the Bible. If they didn’t believe that it was inspired, they at least saw it as a valuable reflection on religious faith.

That’s no longer the case. In many cases, the Bible itself is directly challenged. It’s seen as an ancient book that doesn’t have much to tell us. The existence of God is up for grabs in a way that, generally speaking, in Western culture didn’t exist before.

Some of the earliest church writings . . . came in the generations immediately after the New Testament. There’s a group . . . that’s nicknamed “the apologists.” They [were] defending a Christian worldview in the midst of a pagan worldview and

explaining why Christianity matters in that context.

We need another generation of apologists, . . . [and] there are a variety of issues that they need to address. [They need] to be aware that there are certain assumptions they can no longer make as they make the case for why the Christian faith is . . . the way to look at life.

Del Rosario: In a culture that often pushes back against Christianity—where the Bible is often the question and not the answer in the minds of many people—how can we earn the right to be heard?

Bock: There are three important elements: One is earning respect and credibility by the way you relate to the person next to you, the way you engage them, their seeing your sincerity. Christianity has an inherent critique of the way people live. That's not an easy thing to deal with. They won't care about your critique unless they know you care. That's step one.

The second requires a significant adjustment. . . . We're used to saying, "The Bible says [a proposition is true] and so it's true." . . . I like to reverse that and get people to think, "Maybe it's in the Bible because it's true." . . . So what makes this true? What makes this authentic about a way to live that we need to probe in order to understand why God would put it in his inspired word?

Because what [God is] communicating to us are the realities of life, and if we appreciate why those realities are the way that they are, why the truth is true, . . . you don't have to appeal to the Bible for it. You can also appeal to what this means for quality of life, or for human flourishing, the common good, [what] makes it valuable, and you can lead people into reflecting on the nature of what it is you're arguing for in and of itself without appealing to the Bible for the warrant. For someone [for whom] the Bible is not a warrant, to say "the Bible says it" doesn't do them much good.

[Third], there's a way to have a conversation across a table with someone that emphasizes apologetics as a conversation rather than as a debate. . . . That is the right tonal way into the conversation.

So there are three things here. One is how you relate, the second is knowing how to make the argument, and this third one is understanding you're not in a debate, you're in a conversation, and it's important to draw a person into the topic that you're talking about.

USE A DIFFERENT KIND OF PERSUASION

Rather than operating in “debate mode,” Christians should seek to persuade others by provoking both reflection and a longing for the truth of the gospel. In an episode called “Keys to Effective Cultural Engagement,” Bock discussed a different kind of persuasion with Centre for Public Christianity founding director John Dickson.

Bock: My initial goal . . . is to get the person to pause and reflect. “Might there be another way to think about what we’re talking about?” [My hope is] that what I’m putting out on the table is something they can recognize the potential merit of, and then consider what is being said, because it’s different than what they’re used to hearing.

So it’s persuasion. But not [the kind of] persuasion that has a hammer over your head, [saying,] “Believe this or else!” But [instead] saying, “What I think I’m putting out on the table for you is actually a very helpful way to think about [how] humans should interact and live with one another.” There’s a certain effectiveness of living that’s being represented. [I want to] give them pause so they’ll start to think.

Dickson: I couldn’t agree more. If I lose well in a debate or discussion with a journalist but I’ve done it so well that I know that the audience are thinking, “That Christian guy was reasonable and level headed and pretty nice,” that commends the gospel. I don’t go around trying to lose but I’m not so concerned about losing. . . . Losing well is sometimes a beautiful representation of the gospel for those looking on.

Bock: Yeah, I’m more interested in how the audience is responding than in my trying to defeat the person [the media pitches me against]. My goal is to engage in such a way that I’m commending what I represent as opposed to winning a debate.

The first rule is, “I’m engaged in a conversation versus a debate. I’m not trying to win anything. All that I’m trying to do is demonstrate the reasonableness of what I believe in a way that will draw people in to consider what is being said.”

I’m probably not going to convince the guy on the other side of the microphone, but I’m interested in the person who’s trying to decide, “Which microphone am I going to believe?” and hopefully draw them in my direction as opposed to the direction of the person whom I may be pitted against.

Dickson: And if we think of Christianity as not only true but good, then you've got to allow that sometimes you won't be able to convince an audience that it's true but you might be able to convince them through tone and behavior that it's good. If they have a sense that it's good and beautiful, . . . in some ways that's as good as convincing them that there's a very good argument that Jesus [rose from the dead].

That was C. S. Lewis's approach. He came to believe that if he could convey the beauty of Christianity to people, it would open them up to the truth. . . . He wanted to convey the beauty of ideas to allow people to open up to the possibility that they're also true. To want it to be true is a step along the path to knowing it's true.

The word ἐπιείκεια in Paul's letters [is] translated as "gentleness," but it really means "humanitarian regard," that moderate, fair, just character. We trust . . . the good-hearted person more than anyone else on all topics. The key to persuasion is if you are someone who is trustworthy, . . . that moves belief. [Aristotle] said this ethos is the primary part of persuasion because we believe those we perceive to be credible and fair-minded far more easily than we do anyone else.

If we can convey the goodness of Christianity to people, that it's morally credible, loving, generous, compassionate, humble—all these things that just flow out of the gospel—people [will] long for that goodness even if they're not one-hundred percent convinced that it's rational. What you call apologetics . . . ought to be trying to convey beauty in addition to truth.

These insights, applicable to both personal discussions and public square conversations, represent a different kind of persuasion. Rather than being concerned about winning a debate, we should cause people to pause and reflect on the effectiveness of living seen in the gospel. We must be mindful of our demeanor and the way it affects those who may be watching and listening.

REFLECT GOD'S CHARACTER IN DIALOGUE

Character plays a key role in effective apologetics. McDowell shares an activity he uses to help Christians begin to consider the way we approach engaging with atheists, linking one's confidence in the faith and one's ability to remain charitable in difficult spiritual conversations.

McDowell: One of my favorite things to do at churches, camps, conferences, is . . . to go into role play and put on glasses and [play the role of] an atheist. . . . Then I open it up for questions from the audience. I respond and I shoot them down graciously and kindly as an atheist to break their stereotypes of how they think atheists may be. And I'm telling you, almost every time I do it, people get frustrated. They get upset. I've been called names. I've literally had a guy stand up and threaten me one time. People get agitated. They get upset. They get angry and you can feel the tension coming over the crowd. And then I'll stop, I'll take the glasses off, and instead of saying, "How do we defend faith?" I'll just say, "Here's my first question. How did you treat me as your atheist guest?" And the eyes of people say everything: "Oh, my goodness. I hated you. I wanted to bash you. I was angry at you."

And then I'll say, "Why did people get so defensive?" And then I'll explain, "I think it's because you don't really know what you believe and why." When I push back, it shows an insecurity, so people tend to lash out with anger and defensiveness.

So, if we want to be able to talk about difficult subjects, we have to have confidence in terms of what we believe. Then we're not threatened when people challenge our faith.

This echoes Sharp's early experiences of feeling intimidated at the thought of sharing her faith. Like McDowell, she now holds that knowing what you believe and why you believe it can help Christians avoid feeling flustered, defensive, or angry. We simply must reflect the character of God while engaging with people from a variety of backgrounds. Bock and Dickson discuss:

Bock: The most important thing that we're after is trying to reflect the character and the engagement of God while engaging the world. And if we model what Jesus modeled, then I think it's an important step in the right direction.

Dickson: It is. Peter says that you're to give an [apology] but do this with . . . gentleness and respect. Because you can't defend this Lord that you set apart in your heart . . . without gentleness and respect.

Bock: Colossians 4:5 and 6 goes to the same place: "Let your speech with outsiders always be gracious." There's an interest-

ing combination of moral challenge and invitation that's part of the way the Christian is supposed to function. Conviction and compassion together—you've got to have both. It can't be one or the other or else it will absolutely fail.

Here, Paul is emphatic about how grace should characterize a Christian ambassador at all times. This, along with the demeanor commanded in 1 Peter 3:15–16, should inform the way we engage the culture, make the case for Christianity, and defend the faith.

CONCLUSION

While some Christians approach explaining reasons to believe strictly as an intellectual pursuit, apologetics is much more profound in terms of its role in cultural engagement. It must be characterized by gentleness and respect rather than fear, anger, or resentment. The hope we have in Christ—along with the confidence that comes with knowing what we believe and why we believe it—allows us to be gentle and respectful. This is crucial in engagement and dialogical apologetics. Our tone must communicate our love for those we challenge with the gospel. Approaching apologetics as dialogue should result in a relational, holistic, person-centered conversation rather than an issue-centered debate.

There is no point giving people a rose to smell if you've cut off their noses. But the gift of a rose and its aroma is especially sweet coming from someone who genuinely cares. May God grant us the grace to see apologetics as ministry, engage in genuine dialogue, use a different kind of persuasion, and reflect God's character at all times and in every way.

To access the complete Table episodes in this article or other episodes on a variety of relevant religious, theological, and apologetics topics, visit <http://www.dts.edu/thetable>.

Suggested podcasts:

- Cross-cultural Evangelism and Apologetics
- Culture and Apologetics
- Generosity, Truth, and Beauty in Spiritual Conversations
- Keys to Effective Cultural Engagement
- Truth, Love, and Defending the Faith