

THE TABLE BRIEFING: DIALOGICAL APOLOGETICS AND DIFFICULT SPIRITUAL CONVERSATIONS, PART 2

Darrell L. Bock and Mikel Del Rosario

WHILE ACTOR AND FILMMAKER ALEX KENDRICK is noted for his movies like *Fireproof*, *War Room*, and *Overcomer*, few people realize what undergirds his ethos of engagement. On an episode of the Table podcast called “Faith, Work, and Filmmaking,” he revealed how 1 Peter 3:15 became his life verse:

Kendrick: During college, I was talking to [someone] of the Ba-ha’i faith. They believe there are a number of ways to get to heaven. . . . We got into a little bit of an argument and I found myself growing in frustration that he couldn’t see what I saw in the gospel. We began arguing and . . . both left frustrated.

But the Lord convicted me . . . when I saw 1 Peter 3:15: “But in your heart, sanctify Christ as Lord.” In other words, set him apart as more important than anything else. Then it goes on to say, “And always be ready to give an answer to anyone that asks you of the hope that you have, but do this with gentleness and respect.”

Kendrick’s experience is not uncommon. Many Christians find it difficult to include both truth and love when engaging in difficult spiritual conversations. But what does it look like to engage with

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truth and love on a practical level?

The previous Table Briefing introduced the idea of dialogical apologetics for approaching difficult spiritual conversations not as debate but as loving dialogue. In this briefing, we share four guidelines for bringing truth and love together while navigating conversations with those who see Christianity differently: (1) Ask good questions, (2) listen to understand your conversation partner, (3) consider your character, and (4) reflect God's heart in every encounter. These points came out of our discussions with Stand to Reason president Greg Koukl and staff apologist Amy Hall, Dallas Theological Seminary professors Gary Barnes and Michelle Woody, and Biola University associate professor of Christian apologetics Sean McDowell as well as our personal reflections after recording episodes of the Table podcast.

ASK GOOD QUESTIONS

How can we lovingly begin spiritual conversations? Rather than rushing to explain the evidence for Christian truth claims, it is best to let others share their views first. This allows us to better understand the other person's spiritual concerns. What are their pains and longings? This, in turn, informs how we can better engender trust as we discuss our Christian convictions. On an episode of the Table called "Approaching Spiritual Conversations," Del Rosario talked with Stand to Reason president Greg Koukl and staff apologist Amy Hall about how to use questions to engage in a more personal way.

Koukl: When I meet somebody, . . . I'm not thinking about winning them to Christ; I'm not even thinking about getting to the gospel. All I'm thinking about is getting the lay of the land. So, my first step is to gather information. How do I do that?

Del Rosario: You ask questions.

Koukl: Right. I'm being friendly, making small talk. . . . But if I hear something that seems like an opportunity, I'm going to use my key question: "What do you mean by that?"

I saw a woman wearing a pentagram. It's a five-pointed star; it's often an occultic symbol. In this case, it actually was. But I found out because I asked her, "Does that jewelry have religious significance?" Turns out, she was a witch. But she was happy to talk about her jewelry and her Wiccan convictions. How did I find out about that? I just asked a pleasant

question about the thing: “What do you mean by that jewelry?” Show interest in people, and they start talking.

As they’re talking, I’m starting to get a picture, a lay of the land, a kind of a topography, maybe even a spiritual topography or a cultural topography. I’m starting to get a little picture of where in the culture this person fits. And now I have a map, in a certain sense, based on what they’ve been telling me.

So I’m in a better position to decide whether there’s an opportunity here. . . . If there is an opportunity, now I have an idea of where I might go with my next question.

Del Rosario: The challenging thing for many people is turning down their truth meter, because a lot of Christians will feel like, “Okay, they just said something I disagree with. Now I have to defend the entire content of the Christian worldview, because they have an opinion different from mine.”

Koukl: This is where that first question comes in so well, especially when somebody says something I disagree with. [Let’s say someone] throws this little line out [that] is meant to stop you in your tracks: “You think you have the truth, but everything’s relative.”

The Christian thinks, “It’s my job to [say,] ‘No, it’s not. The Bible’s the Word of God.’” [But] now they’re off on the wrong foot. They’re saying something true, but they’re not getting anywhere. So, what’s my first question when I hear somebody say, “Everything’s relative”?

Del Rosario: “What do you mean by that?”

Koukl: “What do you mean by that? What do you mean by ‘relative?’” Now it’s their turn to explain their view.

Hall: What Greg is describing . . . makes your conversation more personal, because it allows you to tailor what you’re talking about to the person. A lot of people go into witnessing situations with set things they want to say, and it’s not necessarily going to connect with the person they’re talking to. But [this] enables you to connect with someone as an individual. It’s not something that just forces people into the same mold.

Koukl: It gives you a game plan. I do this first. If this is successful, then I think about the second step. If that is successful, I think about the third step.

At the kick-off in a football game, you get the ball way down in the other team's zone. You don't think, "Okay, I'm going to get a touchdown on the next play." No, you work down the field, one play at a time. You're focusing on those plays. If you do your individual plays well, the touchdown is going to be—hopefully—an inevitability. But that's down there.

I don't want people to think about the end game, . . . leading them to Christ, even getting to the gospel. Not yet. That's down the way, . . . and every step is genial in my plan. . . . I want engagement to look more like diplomacy than D-Day. So I'm gathering information. Every time they bring up an objection [or] challenge, I'm asking the same question: What do you mean? Am I avoiding their objection? No, I'm trying to get clarity on their view.

The first question is meant to find out what a person means. You're going to have clarification on their point of view. [But] we also want to know *why* they hold their point of view. The person who makes the claim bears the burden of proof. So, if a person says something, . . . it's that person's responsibility to tell us why we should take that idea seriously. It is not our responsibility to [immediately] try to refute it.

This is where Christians, especially the more aggressive ones, sometimes mess up. Somebody says, "Well, that's relative." [Some Christians immediately] think, "Oh, I'm going to show you why everything's not relative."

Well, wait a minute; you just jumped the gun. You gave that person a free ride because you haven't asked, "How did you come to that conclusion?" or "Why do you think that's true?"

Now, we've got to be careful that we don't ask that question in kind of a snotty way, "Oh, really? How'd you come to that conclusion?" Like, "You idiot." We really want to know the rationale. We want to communicate that with the tone of voice, and we want them to offer [the reasons they hold their view]. Now, we're getting two pieces of information . . . their point of view, and the reasons for their point of view—if they have any.

Asking questions can help you learn what someone believes and why they believe it. Letting people share their views on God, Jesus, and the Bible is very important because they are giving you a gift—a window into their soul. While some people have thought deeply about their views, many people's ideas about Christianity are based on what they have uncritically absorbed from the culture. It is important for Christian leaders to understand how cul-

ture affects common perceptions of Christianity and equip believers to engage people at that level.

LISTEN TO UNDERSTAND

After asking good questions, the next step is to actively listen to the answer with the desire to minister to the person. How did they come to hold their beliefs? Sometimes, though, we miss the answers to our questions due to internal communication noise. This can include distracting thoughts or listening with the intent to refute challenges. On an episode of the Table called “Beginning Difficult Conversations,” Bock discussed this with DTS professors of biblical counseling Gary Barnes and Michelle Woody.

Bock: If you go into a conversation with an agenda, you’re actually not interested in a conversation. The tension becomes how to engage in a good conversation well, . . . but the key to having a good conversation is being a good listener first.

Barnes: Yes. When we’re bumping into differences, there are underlying things that are driving within us: “Will I be accepted or will I be rejected with my difference?” . . . The most important thing is that awareness of “What is it that’s welling up within me that becomes a barrier for me actually moving toward the other person with their difference?”

Bock: Well, difficult conversations have three layers: There’s what you’re talking about. Then there’s the filter through which you’re looking at what you’re talking about. And then there’s your identity or your perception of yourself—what’s at stake in what you’re talking about. Oftentimes, people think they’re only talking about the top layer, and they don’t think about the other two layers. But the other two layers are driving what’s happening in the conversations. So, how do you move past the top layer and think about what’s underneath?

Woody: Subconsciously, winning and losing is a part of our conversation: “I have to win. . . . I’ve got to make sure I can persuade you.” So active listening—that’s where we have to start.

Bock: There’s a test that I run . . . [to] tell whether I’m in the right mode or not to advance the conversation: When the person is talking to me, am I paying attention to what they’re say-

ing? Or am I thinking through my response? Usually, if I'm in a combative mode . . . then [I've defaulted to] rebuttal mode.

Christians must engage holistically and recognize the importance of listening to understand the other person's perspective. One helpful exercise is to repeat that view back to the person in order to ensure that you are engaging it fairly. Christian ambassadors must develop an awareness of factors beyond the subject matter—including worldview filters and identity issues—that may be influencing the discussion. A patient, listening ear can do much to demonstrate courageous yet compassionate engagement.

CONSIDER YOUR CHARACTER

How should we respond when a difficult conversation gets tense? Peter writes, "It is better to suffer for doing good, if God wills it, than for doing evil" (1 Peter 3:17, NET). That is, we must not react with hostility, even in the face of unjust responses. As ambassadors of Christ, the character we display in the midst of difficult spiritual conversations must be congruent with the fruit of the Spirit and the way Jesus himself suffered. Hall and Koukl explain:

Hall: Character is actually an apologetic because we are representing Christ. So in 1 Peter [2:9], when it says, "We were called so that we can proclaim the excellencies of Him who called us," that passage is actually sandwiched among a lot of behavioral commands saying, "Prove yourself to be someone with good behavior so that they'll glorify God" (v. 12).

So our character is representing Christ to other people. . . . We can show the gospel to them by responding in ways that they don't deserve. Because that's how God responded to us.

Every time they're rude to us and we respond with grace, we're giving an apologetic for Jesus's character that people need to see. . . . [1 Peter 3:15, which says] to give a defense with gentleness and respect, begins with saying, "Sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts." And that's your obedience to Christ; that's your character that begins this whole process.

When we respond, character is a huge part [of that]. We want to represent Christ; we want to be truthful; we want to be humble. We want to show all the things that make Christ great so they can see who he is.

I think the key thing you have to remember is the dignity of the human being you're talking to. . . . We're speaking to

someone who is made in the image of God, no matter how rude they're being.

Koukl: Proverbs [15:1] says, "A harsh word stirs up anger, but a gentle answer turns away wrath." . . . You don't want to be poking people in the eye by the way you're communicating.

Here's the deal: If I get mad, I'm going to lose. What if I don't get mad and they get mad? Well, then I'm still going to lose. If anybody gets mad, then we're going to lose. That is, we are not going to be able to have the positive impact as ambassadors for Christ we want to have.

Sometimes, it's not our fault they get mad. It's the message's fault. And we live with that. But we want to try to avoid anything that makes them unnecessarily angry. We want to maneuver with the kind of grace that's appropriate to the message of grace that we're communicating.

Disciples of Jesus must engage and show a different way of relating, even to those who reject them. In this way, believers who demonstrate a Christlike character may be the most effective way to overcome negative Christian stereotypes. On an episode of the Table called "Truth, Love, and Defending the Faith," McDowell talked about the importance of having reasons for faith and how he helps churches consider a better way to engage skeptics and others who see Christianity differently.

McDowell: I [heard Darrell Bock's presentation] on the church responding to the broader issue of homosexuality and same-sex marriage, and something [he] said at the end really stuck with me. . . . The idea was that when some people think about Christians, they think of intolerant, bigoted, hateful, homophobic [people]. And the most important way that we can help change this narrative for the sake of the gospel is [to engage in such a way that] when somebody hears this charge against Christians, their first thought [becomes], "That doesn't really ring true. I know Christians and they don't treat me that way."

The power of individual Christians reaching out to nonbelievers . . . is probably the most important way to overturn this cultural stereotype that is affecting the way that we're seen and relate to people, . . . and I think the only way we can really speak with meekness and respect and gentleness, is in fact if we know what we believe and why we believe it.

Our apologetic arguments or explanations of the faith are not

heard in a vacuum. They are experienced in the context of life and personality. A quiet confidence in the truth of Christianity and a character congruent with the example of Jesus carry a persuasive strength that merely refuting arguments will never match.

REFLECT GOD'S HEART

We must reflect God's heart for all people and present the Christian message as a positive one. On the one hand, there is a tension in how the gospel challenges our beliefs and actions. On the other hand, it includes an invitation to know and experience God in a personal way. Unfortunately, some tend to emphasize what is wrong with society and inadvertently minimize hope in Christ. Others seem to portray this hope as an exclusively future reality rather than one that can be present today.

However, Christian hope should result in humble engagement and genuine love for the people we challenge with the gospel message. Reflecting God's heart means engaging in difficult spiritual conversations with gentleness and respect rather than with fear, anger, or resentment. Before entering a difficult spiritual conversation, ask God to help you reflect his heart as you minister to your conversation partner.

Spiritual conversations become unproductive when either participant becomes angry. Rather than respond in anger, let us reflect God's heart and model a different way of relating to people who reject our message.

This was the example of Jesus. Peter wrote, "Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit" (1 Pet 3:18). God took the initiative to reach out to us before we embraced him or his message. Let us navigate difficult spiritual conversations while remembering the gracious way God treats us.

CONCLUSION

Reflecting on the conversation he had with the Baha'i student during his college days, Kendrick says, "I could articulate [the faith], and I was ready to defend it, but there wasn't the meekness or the gentleness the Scripture talks about. [I had the demeanor of], 'You're crazy [because] you don't see my way.' But truth and love should go together." Today, 1 Peter 3:15 undergirds his ethos of engagement. "Now I try to incorporate a very loving but truthful approach."

We must help Christians understand what influences popular ideas about God, Jesus, and the Bible and equip them to engage the culture and defend the truth. At the same time, we must help believers understand the importance of reflecting God's loving character at all times. Our demeanor in the midst of difficult spiritual conversations must always emulate the way God took the initiative to pursue us before we embraced him or his message. Engaging in dialogical apologetics includes asking good questions, listening to understand, considering our character, and reflecting God's heart in every encounter.

To access Table episodes on a variety of religious, theological, and apologetics topics, visit <http://www.dts.edu/thetable>.

Suggested podcasts:

- Approaching Spiritual Conversations
- Beginning Difficult Conversations
- Faith, Work, and Filmmaking
- How to Engage in Spiritual Conversations
- Truth, Love, and Defending the Faith

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