

## Introduction

Apologetics, generally defined, is the rational defense of the Christian faith. 1 Peter 3:15 instructs us to sanctify Jesus as Lord, and to always be ready to give a defense (*apologia*) for the hope that we have. Yet we are to do this with gentleness and respect. As we look at this passage from 1 Peter, there are four elements or principles that can be drawn out. These might be called the four C's of Christian witness: The core, the content, the conduct, and the conscience.

But in your hearts set apart 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, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander. (1 Pet. 3:15-16 NIV)

Sanctifying Jesus as Lord can be seen as the *core*. This is the central element from which the defense of the faith springs. (Matt. 12:33, Prov. 4:23) The “being ready” and “giving a defense” can be seen as the *content*. Content deals with the topics, issues, and arguments relevant to the truth claims of Christianity. “Gentleness and respect” refers to *conduct*. The conduct is the manner in which the Christian engages in their witness: their style, approach, manner, tone, and presentation. The *conscience* is the true character and integrity of the communicator. It is this integrity that shames those who would slander the Christian. These four C's of Christian witness are so crucially intertwined that a failure to develop any one of them leads to a severe detriment to the effectiveness of the Christian case-maker.

This essay will make the case that the content and conduct of Christian apologetics must be person-sensitive in two ways. First, it must be sensitive to the

audience one is interacting with. Second, it must be sensitive to the person of Jesus Christ.

Let us briefly define what is meant here by being person-sensitive. Person-sensitive *to the audience* is defined here as being attentive and aware of the spiritual, emotional, and attitudinal condition of the person one is speaking with. Being sensitive to these factors means adapting one's approach (which includes content and conduct) accordingly. In other words, knowing where the person is so that you can rightly understand the starting point for that unique interaction.

Person-sensitive *to the person of Jesus Christ* is defined here as being attentive and aware of the ultimate goal of all interaction: to point a person to *The Person* of Jesus Christ. Being person-sensitive to Christ also means taking one's cues from the person of Christ, both from the Holy Spirit and from Holy Scripture.

Being person-sensitive entails adapting one's content to the audience, being consistent in one's conduct as a Christian, being mindful of the response of the individual, being informed by scripture and influenced by the Holy Spirit.

### **Sensitive to the Audience**

Colossians 4:6 instructs Christians to, "Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone." (NIV) This verse implies that in addition to the content of one's speech, the conduct of one's speech is of utmost importance. This verse brings attention to the *how* of interaction (the conduct), not just the *what* of interaction (the content).

Colossians 4:6 also implies that the manner in which Christian interaction is done is dependent upon the person one is addressing. In short, the Christian witness must be

person-sensitive in his approach. No one approach suits every individual. As David K. Clark points out, “One important way to relate apologetics to life is to take this fact into account: every assessment of the case for Christianity is made by real people who have unique agendas firmly in place.”<sup>1</sup>

Clark goes on to explain that:

Apologetics ... should not be understood as an attempt to develop a perfect system of assertion and argument that will prove the faith once and for all. Rather, it is a strategy for presenting, in the course of a unique discussion with a particular audience, the sort of case that makes sense to those persons. In other words, apologetics is the reasoned defense of the Christian faith in the context of personal dialogue.<sup>2</sup>

Noting that Jesus himself used different approaches when dealing with different people, and realizing that this principle is true to everyday experience even in non-apologetic dialogue, the appropriate manner of dialogue may be as diverse as the individuals we are dealing with. Because everyone is in a different place in their knowledge, experience, and spiritual journey, our starting point for individuals will vary. As Clark puts it, “...I try to find out what he knows and work from there. If knowledge is person-centered, then my apologetic should start with what this man believes.”<sup>3</sup>

### **Being “Aware of the Soil”**

The farmer sows the word. Some people are like seed along the path, where the word is sown. As soon as they hear it, Satan comes and takes away the word that was sown in them. Others, like seed sown on rocky places, hear the word and at once receive it with joy. But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away. Still others, like seed sown among thorns, hear the word; but the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things come in and choke

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<sup>1</sup>David K. Clark, *Dialogical Apologetics: A Person-Centered Approach to Christian Defense* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1993), p.viii.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 99.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 111.

the word, making it unfruitful. Others, like seed sown on good soil, hear the word, accept it, and produce a crop---thirty, sixty or even a hundred times what was sown. (Mark 4:14-20 NIV)

Part of apologetic dialogue is “being aware of the soil.” If the goal is to plant seed in good ground, it will serve us well to first till the soil, to remove unwanted stones (intellectual or emotional barriers), and to make the person we are speaking with more receptive to the message of the Gospel. This calls for doing one’s best to assess the state of the soil, and respond accordingly. Greg Koukl offers this advice:

I encourage you to consider the strategy I use when God opens a door of opportunity for me. I pray quickly for wisdom, then ask myself this: What one thing can I say in this circumstance, what one question can I ask, what seed can I plant that will get the other person thinking? Then I simply try to put a stone in the person’s shoe.<sup>4</sup>

We will not always have the opportunity to share the Gospel message (to plant the seed, as it were), but we can assess the state of the soil and work on the “next step” for that individual. As Paul pointed out to the Corinthians, Christians will play various roles in the Gospel work:

What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe---as the Lord has assigned to each his task. I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow. The man who plants and the man who waters have one purpose, and each will be rewarded according to his own labor. For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, God's building. (1 Cor. 3:5-9 NIV)

Christians have a commission to communicate Christ. However, the means by which many deliver the message is myopic. A short-sited approach that would see success in dialogue *only* as delivering the full gospel message is not only unrealistic, but can sometimes be detrimental. Paul’s statements above suggest that different people play

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<sup>4</sup> Gregory Koukl, *Tactics: A Game Plan for Discussing Your Christian Convictions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008), p. 44.

different roles in the communicating the gospel in different ways – all of which God is able to use as He has purposed. Clark summarizes the goal well:

What then is my goal as an apologist in dialogue? It is this: to present the best case I can for the truth as I see it for the benefit of others. I should not evaluate the success of dialogue only by whether my partners agree in the end. From my viewpoint, success in dialogue is presenting the case for Christianity, by the Spirit's power, with rational force, cultural appropriateness, and personal sensitivity in the context of relationship.<sup>5</sup>

### **Self-Conscious**

Having a person-sensitive approach requires adaptation on the part of the communicator. The concept is simply this: being conscious of how others are responding should make Christian communicators more conscious of *how* they themselves are engaging.

The apostle Peter exhorts Christians to: “Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.” (1 Peter 2:12 NIV) This idea is echoed later in 1 Peter 3:16 (quoted above). Peter suggests that the conduct and character of the Christian would make people “ashamed of their slander.”

First, this entails that Christians should be aware of how they are coming across to others. Without a person-sensitive approach, some communicators deliver the “good news” in ways that may best be described as cringe worthy. As James Sire explains: “Valid, well substantiated arguments presented with arrogance, aggression or an overly clever attitude are often not heard clearly enough to attract the attention they deserve.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>Clark, p. 122.

<sup>6</sup>James W. Sire, *Why Good Arguments Often Fail: Making a More Persuasive Case for Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), p. 74

So the Christian would do well to not become the stumbling block. Clark puts it this way: “...ensure that if a person rejects the gospel, she actually rejects the *message*, not the *messenger* or the *method*.”<sup>7</sup>

Second, this entails that even if an unbeliever is hostile in their reaction to the message, the integrity of the messenger will serve a key role in the power of the message. One’s character not only affects the perceived credibility of the message, but this also leaves an open door for future engagement. Sire notes that, “It really is better to ‘lose’ an argument and gain a friend. You can have many more dialogues with the friend.”<sup>8</sup> As the apostle Paul suggested, there are other laborers who may come along to plant or water the seed. (1 Cor. 3:5-9)

Now we turn our attention to being person-sensitive to the person of Jesus Christ.

### **Sensitive to the Person of Jesus Christ**

In the book of Acts, Jesus has his disciples wait for the empowerment of the Holy Spirit to be his witnesses: “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” (Acts 1:8 NIV) It is through this empowerment by the Spirit that the world was “turned upside down.” (Acts 17:6)

If the Christian communicator is *only* sensitive to the audience, then his work is hopeless. (Ps. 127:1) The Christian must also be sensitive to the Spirit. Greg Koukl points out the Spirit’s central role: “Without the work of the Spirit, no argument – no matter how persuasive – will be effective. But neither will any act of love nor any simple

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<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 209.

<sup>8</sup>Sire, p. 79.

presentation of the gospel. Add the Spirit, though, and the equation changes dramatically.”<sup>9</sup>

This is the first element of being sensitive to the person of Jesus Christ: being empowered by the Holy Spirit (not to mention being filled with his word). But the second element is this: introducing people to the Person of Jesus Christ. According to the apostle Paul, God has given Christians the ministry of reconciliation.

“that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God.” (2 Cor. 5:19-20 NIV)

If Christians are Christ’s ambassadors to bring a message of reconciliation between God and man, then this commission should permeate all interactions. Winning arguments is not the goal. Proving propositions is not the goal. Introducing people to a Person is the goal. Boa and Bowman put it this way:

“Christian apologetics [...] is at the heart about Christ. Its goal is to present reasons why people should trust in Jesus Christ as their Savior and Lord. An apologetic that is not in some way focused on Christ is therefore deficient.”<sup>10</sup>

This ministry of reconciliation carries with it moral obligations on the part of those hearing the message. Often, this is the very thing that the unbeliever, at core, is rejecting. As Sire puts it, “Christian claims to truth often imply moral obligation. As ordinary human beings, we do not want to be morally obligated, and so we reject ideas

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<sup>9</sup>Koukl, p. 40.

<sup>10</sup>Kenneth Boa & Robert Bowman, *Faith Has Its Reasons: An Integrative Approach to Defending Christianity* (Waynesboro, GA: Authentic Publishing, 2005), p. 509.

that obligate us.”<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, the Christian communicator is to be sensitive to the person while sensitive to Christ, faithful with the task at hand, and motivated by love.

### **The Goal of this Command is Love**

Being person-sensitive to Jesus and to people is implicit in the Bible’s teaching on love.

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing. Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. (1 Cor. 13:1-8 NIV)

Jesus’ answer about the greatest commandment also shows that loving God and loving people is the highest calling:

Jesus replied: “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.” (Matt. 22:37-40 NIV)

Love is not only the motivation behind our apologetic, but it is also an apologetic itself, as Geisler and Zukeran explain:

Without a doubt, love is a great apologetic. Jesus says, “By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (John 13:35). Love and truth are two great weapons in the battle for the souls of men and women. Love attracts them, and truth enlightens them. Jesus says, “You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (John 8:32). And Paul reminds us that we should always be “speaking the truth in love” (Ephesians 4:15). The wedding of the two makes a powerful apologetic.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>Sire, p. 116.

<sup>12</sup>Norman Geisler and Patrick Zukeran, *The Apologetics of Jesus: A Caring Approach to Dealing with Doubters* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2009), p. 166.

## **Conclusion**

It is clear from scripture that Christian communication must be person-sensitive. Interactions are as unique as the people to whom we communicate, and the content should be geared accordingly. The conduct of the Christian is to be consistent, and they should be attentive to the response of their audience. And finally, the Christian must be empowered by the Holy Spirit in order to be effective, with the ultimate love-motivated goal of introducing all people to the Person of Jesus Christ.

“A good case for the Christian faith lays before the watching world such a winsome embodiment of the Christian faith that for any and all who are willing to observe there will be an intellectually and emotionally credible witness to its fundamental truth.”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup>Sire, p. 17.