BECOMING A “SEASONED” APOLOGIST

Writing from prison, the apostle Paul instructed the Colossian Christians, “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” (Col. 2:5-6).1 In first-century Asia Minor, Paul’s saline metaphor would have conjured up images, not of unhealthy fast food, but rather of a highly sought-after commodity that was of great value for human existence and civilization. Salt is so uniquely suited for enhancing flavor that Plato described the mineral as “pleasing to the gods.”2 As journalist Mark Kurlansky explains, “[Its] ability to preserve, to protect against decay, as well as to sustain life, has given salt a broad metaphorical importance.”3 In fact, for the ancient Israelites salt served as an essential, purifying ingredient in their sacrifices (see Exod. 30:35; Lev. 2:13) and its immutable and preservative essence made it an apt symbol of God’s everlasting covenant with King David—“a covenant of salt” (2 Chron. 13:5; cf. Num. 18:19).

In calling for wise behavior and “seasoned” apologetic conversation, Paul thus emphasizes that the manner of one’s presentation and defense of the gospel is often as crucial as its content and that the character of the evangelist-apologist is of first importance. It is not enough to be equipped with apologetic reasons in defense of the faith; we must also live attractive apologetic lives. Not only must we become equipped to know what to say to unbelievers, we must also learn how to say it. In order to make the most of every evangelistic opportunity we must season our conversations with the pleasing flavor of salt. As a pneumonic device for the key ingredients of such winning apologetic evangelism we can use the acronym S-A-L-T.

Sensitivity. The “S” in “SALT” stands for sensitivity and reminds us that effective apologetics is as much about listening as it is about speaking. It is often the case that people need more than answers to the questions they verbalize; sometimes what they need goes beyond words. To become a spiritually sensitive apologist, therefore, one must learn to listen beyond the question.

Consider, for example, the oft-debated problem of evil. The question, “How can a loving God allow tragic evils in this world?” is rarely motivated by mere intellectual curiosity. For many this issue arises out of bitterness and anger toward God for tragedies in their own lives or in the lives of those they love. For such individuals a cold, intellectual response void of compassion and love can contribute more to their pain than it does to their healing.

It is thus occasionally appropriate to temporarily withhold truth that our listeners are not prepared to hear; however, it is never a good idea to withhold truth indefinitely. The knowledge that a good, loving, and all-powerful God actually exists and loves all people enough to send his Son to die for them is, after all, the ultimate comfort in times of pain and sorrow. We therefore must learn the art of demonstrating God’s love for hurting people through compassionate behavior in addition to our words. As apologist Ravi Zacharias has written, “We are not only called to give answers, but to be answer bearers, often responding with gentle hands and swift feet rather than with words alone.”4

Effective apologists also must learn to listen beyond the question when unbelievers verbalize intellectual doubts as smoke screens for their unwillingness to repent from sinful lifestyles. Philosopher J. Budziszewski acknowledges this and writes, “It’s an odd thing about us human beings: Not many of us disbelieve in God and then begin to sin—rather, we get involved in some clinging sin or start wanting to
fit in, and then we find excuses to disbelieve in God. For this reason, the best apologetics in the world cannot succeed unless students know how to unmask their own secret motives."

It is occasionally necessary therefore to ask pointed questions about peoples’ lifestyles and underlying motivations for refusing to respond reasonably to the evidence by surrendering their lives to God. We must be careful here, however, not to become self-righteously judgmental. The point is to be sensitive to peoples’ needs in order to help them come closer to trusting God with their lives, not to push them further away. Whether unbelievers present their intellectual doubts sincerely, as responses to emotional pain, or as smoke screens for their refusal to turn from sinful lifestyles, we must learn to listen beyond their questions, being sensitive to their ultimate needs.

**Applicability.** An effective evangelist also must present apologetics answers that are applicable or relevant to hearers. In today’s sound-byte culture, news, weather, the latest celebrity gossip, and sports statistics are only a mouse-click away, and many people have lost the patience for using dial-up Internet connections, let alone for reading entire books. As a result, this generation has fallen into the trap of basing beliefs and even entire worldviews on persuasive catch-phrases rather than solid evidence and logical argumentation.

One way that we can engage an audience on information overload is to present evidence for the truth of the Christian worldview as part of the natural flow of conversations about the hot topics of our day. Rather than attempting to present theistic arguments in isolation from broad cultural interests, for example, we can provide reasons to believe in God’s existence within the context of such popular hot topics as the problem of evil and the relationship between science and religion.

**Love.** “If I speak in the tongues of men and angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal” (1 Cor. 13:1). With these words Paul underscores the reality that no matter how applicable, our evangelistic dialogue will be obnoxious noise unless motivated foremost by love. Jesus proclaimed that the first and greatest commandment is to “‘love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind’” (Matt. 22:37). Our thoughts, beliefs, and reasoning, therefore, always should reflect our love for God.

Effective apologetic evangelism also must be motivated by love for people. Jesus taught that the second greatest commandment is to “‘love your neighbor as yourself’” (Matt. 22:39). Love for others requires that we seek their highest good even if that involves telling them something they do not want to hear, for, despite what they may want, the truth is what they need. The truth, though freeing once it is accepted (see John 8:32), often can be painful to hear, especially for those whose lives are based on false beliefs and philosophies. We therefore must demonstrate to our neighbors that our love for them, though it requires us to speak the truth, is not dependent on their acceptance of the truth. In the words of apologist Dean Halverson, “through friendship we are building a bridge of trust that will be able to carry the weight of truth.”

**Truth.** The importance of truth in apologetic evangelism may seem too obvious to deserve mention, but, far too frequently, well-meaning Christians uncritically accept and employ false arguments as evidence for the truth of the Christian worldview. This can seriously undermine their credibility and contribute to the formation of intellectual barriers to faith. It is thus crucial that our apologetics study and dialogue be motivated not only by love for God and for others, but also by humble, self-critical love for truth. In fact, love for God entails love for truth because God is the author and originator of truth, which is ultimately revealed in Jesus Christ (see John 14:6).

Love for truth often is mischaracterized as intellectual snobbery or an argumentative spirit, but it does not entail either of these. Genuine love for truth, according to Scripture, is predicated on humility (e.g., Prov. 1:7; 11:2). Anyone who sincerely is interested in discovering the truth about the most important questions of life first must concern herself with cultivating right thoughts about God. It is impossible when rightly focused on God to think too highly of oneself. In the words of C. S. Lewis, “In God you come up against something which is in every respect immeasurably superior to yourself. Unless you
know God as that—and, therefore, know yourself as nothing in comparison—you do not know God at all.” A humble commitment to truth is therefore an essential characteristic of effective and God-glorifying apologetics in one’s life.

**No More Tasteless Apologetics.** In one of Job’s impassioned laments, he exclaimed, “Is tasteless food eaten without salt, or is there flavor in the white of an egg? I refuse to touch it; such food makes me ill” (Job 6:6–7). Just as Job found tasteless food without salt repulsive and poetically indicative of his immense suffering, so too apologetics presented without sensitivity, applicability, love, and truth can turn unbelievers away from acceptance of the gospel. Those who desire to proclaim and defend the gospel effectively with well-reasoned answers, then, must always remember to let their speech and lives be seasoned with S-A-L-T. In the words of the Son of David, in whom God’s eternal covenant of salt was fulfilled, “Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with each other” (Mark 9:50).

— Adam C. Pelser

**NOTES**

1. All Scripture quotations are from the New International Version.