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THE TEN COMMANDMENTS OF APOLOGETICS

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When I first began my apologetic ministry, I learned the hard way—as probably many of you did—that possessing apologetic knowledge and the ability to answer the tough questions does not qualify someone as a good apologist. It's also necessary to engage unbelievers in such a way that they will give us a fair hearing—that they will listen, understand, and seriously consider our perspective. In this article, I'll lay out the do's and don'ts of good apologetics. On the "do" side are the principles of sound apologetic tactics. On the "don't" side are the pitfalls of poor apologetics—things to avoid. Together they provide the ground rules of effective apologetic evangelism. I call these principles the ten commandments of apologetics.¹

RULE 1: GOSPEL FIRST, APOLOGETICS SECOND

Whenever possible, try to start a witnessing encounter with the gospel—which is what unbelievers must hear in order to be saved. It is wrong to assume that every unbeliever harbors intellectual objections to Christianity. Hence, not every witnessing situation requires an apologetic defense (or offense). If the unbeliever responds to the gospel, forget apologetics and continue to share the good news of Jesus Christ. Confirm the gospel by sharing your personal testimony, demonstrating the life-transforming power of the Holy Spirit in your own life.

RULE 2: STAY WITH THE ESSENTIALS

Most non-Christians know little about the Bible or what Christians believe, and what they think they know is often in error. In witnessing opportunities, avoid theological subjects that will be confusing to unbelievers, such as eschatology or predestination. Likewise, avoid debatable issues, such as speaking in tongues or methods of baptism. Similarly (if you can), don't get hung up on controversial issues, such as the age of the earth. We should never muddy the waters of good apologetics and evangelism with topics Christians may rightfully disagree about. Of course, if the unbeliever raises an issue that he or she is genuinely concerned about, we need to respond appropriately.

The apostle Paul gives a good summary of the essentials in 1 Corinthians 15:3–4. In a word, they always revolve around the person and work of Jesus Christ.

RULE 3: REMEMBER YOUR GOAL

The goal of apologetics is to identify and remove obstacles that prevent a person from seriously considering Christianity as a worldview and Jesus Christ as personal Savior. The impulse for many new students of apologetics is to rush out and confront everyone you know and challenge their misbeliefs (especially family members or friends who may have tripped you up in the past). But keep in mind that often a person’s “obstacle” is not intellectual at all. It may have been a bad experience in church or with a hypocritical Christian. It may be an emotional struggle or the loss of a loved one, resulting in anger at God. Often Christian love and understanding is all that is needed.

RULE 4: THERE IS MORE LATITUDE IN APOLOGETICS THAN IN THEOLOGY

The intent of apologetics is to provide intelligent responses to what unbelievers think are insurmountable obstacles to Christianity. But apologetics is not theology. When a challenging issue arises, we are not obligated to give the definitive theological answer, or even our own personal position on the topic. We must give answers that are theologically legitimate and will bear up under biblical scrutiny. If these conditions are met, apologetic responses that avoid dogmatic theological positions are an acceptable means of lovingly removing obstacles that prevent unbelievers from seriously considering Christianity.

Two examples come to mind: the age of the earth and the eternal fate of people who never had an opportunity to hear the gospel message. Christians can disagree legitimately on both these issues, but one’s personal *theological* position may not be the best *apologetic* response. Sticking exclusively to a young-earth creation model causes some apologists to omit convincing intelligent design data because it implies an old earth. There is nothing wrong with using Big Bang cosmology or the anthropic principle when doing apologetics, regardless of the age of the earth.

Likewise, there are at least three views on the fate of people who never heard of Jesus (or lived before His incarnation). One can argue that these people are destined to eternal separation from God; or one can point out that God may judge them according to the “light” they have received and how they responded to it (i.e., general revelation); or one can explain the “middle knowledge” view espoused by William Lane Craig and others.² Even if you believe the first—and many Christians do—the latter two will get you further in terms of removing this particular obstacle to belief in Jesus Christ.

RULE 5: FIND OUT THE REAL PROBLEM

Sometimes unbelievers will raise objections to Christianity that do not mirror their real concerns. Generally, they fall into one of three categories: emotional, willful, or intellectual. Emotional issues, such as anger at God or a bad experience in church, are not solved through apologetics. These people need to have personal friendships with

mature, committed Christians. They need to experience Christian love and observe sincere Christian faith in action.

People who willfully reject Christianity despite our best apologetic efforts have made an intentional commitment to unbelief. Their minds are made up, and they don't want to be bothered with the facts. Normally, the best we can do in these cases is to try to maintain an ongoing friendship—and continue to pray that God will open their hearts and minds to truth.

Finally, for the person with genuine intellectual obstacles, we apply apologetics.

If we fail to identify the unbeliever's real issue, we may never convince him or her that Christianity is true. So it's crucial that we identify whatever the obstacle is that stands between an unbeliever and faith in Jesus Christ, and then deal with it accordingly.

RULE 6: AVOID DISTRACTIONS

Apologists encounter several varieties of distractions, but perhaps the most common (and frustrating) are from people who like to argue just for the sake of arguing, and are unwilling to examine the decisive issues critically: Who is Jesus Christ? Is salvation only through Him? Is the Bible true? These people characteristically interrupt, change the subject, wander off on ridiculous rabbit trails, or ask a question but won't let you answer before they jump to another question.

We respond to these individuals by keeping the conversation under control. Keep them on track by constantly returning to the issue at hand. Point out that you are willing to listen to them, but they in turn must give you the same respectful attention, or there is no use continuing the discussion. Insist they let you respond to one issue before they raise another one. If they try to dominate the conversation, point out that a conversation is two-sided—or it becomes a lecture. Again, keep the conversation under control.

RULE 7: KNOW WHAT YOU BELIEVE (DEFENSIVE APOLOGETICS)

The Lord has charged us with the responsibility to evangelize the lost (Acts 1:8) and to defend our faith (1 Pet. 3:15; Jude 3). In order to do this, however, we must be able to do three things. First, we must understand and be able to explain orthodox biblical doctrine, especially the essentials of our faith (which revolve around the person and work of Jesus Christ). Second, we must be able to demonstrate these doctrines from Scripture—back up what we say the Bible teaches. This requires a consistent and systematic study of the Bible. And third, we must be able to defend Christian truth-claims; that is, present rational and verifiable apologetic evidences whenever necessary.

This is defensive apologetics. It entails being prepared to answer the challenges and objections unbelievers raise with regard to Christianity as a worldview.

RULE 8: KNOW WHAT UNBELIEVERS BELIEVE (OFFENSIVE APOLOGETICS)

Whereas "defensive" apologetics is defending Christianity, "offensive" apologetics is challenging the unbelievers' beliefs. This entails two steps. On the one hand, it is crucial

that we know what an unbeliever believes. An analogy can be made with missions. Before missionaries go into a foreign culture, they learn as much as they can about the culture: religious beliefs, the language, social customs, moral behaviors, religious and cultural taboos, and so on. Such insights help them to discern the best way to initiate a culturally relevant evangelistic strategy. The lesson here is to be prepared. Do your homework. Learn what you can about the religious and secular worldviews you are likely to encounter in the neighborhood, at work or school, and in social activities.

The second step is to apply an offensive apologetic tactic known as the Socratic method. It entails asking specific questions that put the burden of proof on the unbelievers; challenges them to explain and justify *their* position on the issue at hand (e.g., "The Bible is unreliable because it's been translated so many times over the centuries." "Evolution is a fact of science." "All religions are equal; they are just different paths to the same God."). The idea is that once unbelievers *conclude for themselves* that their assumptions about Christianity (or perceptions about their own worldview) cannot be substantiated, they will be more likely to consider the Christian perspective seriously.³

RULE 9: DON'T BE INTIMIDATED

Most of the non-Christians we engage in apologetic discussions are friends, relatives, coworkers, fellow students, and neighbors. Few have much (if any) knowledge of the Bible or have read even a portion of it. More often than not, these critics are merely parroting what they hear in popular culture, such as the Internet, television, and in secular schools. Seldom are their challenges well-thought-out arguments. Don't let the fear of being unable to respond adequately to challenges prevent you from engaging in apologetic discussions.

If you do encounter questions you can't answer, or arguments you can't refute, admit it. Our response to all challenges must be honest. Not having a response at the moment, however, is not the same as saying there is no response. Point this out. Assure the unbeliever that there is an answer to his challenge and that you will find it. This provides an opportunity to meet another time. If you won't be seeing that person again, ask if you can get back to him or her by e-mail once you've found an answer. If that's not possible, research the answer anyway. Next time you'll have a response if the issue arises.

RULE 10: KEEP THE RIGHT ATTITUDE

Shortly after I began my apologetic ministry in the mid-eighties, two Mormon missionaries knocked on my door, and I invited them in. The discussion did not go well for them, and they asked if they could return with their "superior." I agreed, and the four of us met about a week later. As the three were leaving the second time, one of them turned to me and said, "You know, you're the nicest person we've ever talked to!"

People who know me well would chuckle if they heard this story because I have a reputation for being rather blunt and outspoken. Their flattering comment does not accurately reflect my normal behavior when engaged in, say, a lively discussion (as C.

S. Lewis put it) on “a tough bit of theology.” I was being polite and respectful, as all Christians should be when sharing with unbelievers—or fellow Christians with a different perspective on that “tough bit of theology.”

The lesson here is that being discourteous or rude does not create an environment that encourages the work of the Holy Spirit. I could have gotten frustrated, then angry, then argumentative, but that would only reinforce their conviction that Christianity is in error. When unbelievers get rude and defensive with us, don't we assume it's because they know they're wrong and can't admit it?

The primary apologetic text in the Bible is 1 Peter 3:15: “But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer [Greek: *apologia*: defense] to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.” Unfortunately, this is as far as some Christian apologists go. They don't apply the equally important last part of the verse—and the one that creates an atmosphere where unbelievers willingly give us a fair hearing: “But do this with gentleness and respect” (NIV).

Critical thinking, persuasive reasoning, and objective facts are the tools of the trade in apologetics. And for a trained apologist, it's not difficult to thwart arguments raised by non-Christians—even sophisticated challenges. But this does not automatically result in a conversion. We may win the argument, but the unbeliever may still remain far from Christ. Good apologetics is convincing without being aggressive or belligerent.

So how do we defend our faith with “gentleness and respect?” The apostle Paul gives us the answer in Colossians 4:5–6 and 2 Timothy 2:24–25. By following his advice, Christian apologists will seem not only interested in sharing truth but also genuinely interested in the unbeliever as a person—which we should be.

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NOTES

- 1 This article is adapted from my book *Engaging the Closed Minded; Presenting Your Faith to the Confirmed Unbeliever* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1999), chap. 2.
- 2 For an explanation of this see my book, *The Christian Combat Manual; Helps for Defending Your Faith: A Handbook for Practical Apologetics* (Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 2007), chap. 25.
- 3 I explain how to apply the Socratic method in *Engaging the Closed Minded*, chap. 4, “Offensive Apologetics.”