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THREE WAYS TO TEACH YOUR KIDS APOLOGETICS

(Without Them Realizing It)

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As parents, we want our kids to grow up in a world where belief in God is viewed as reasonable and desirable. Unfortunately, there are loud voices — Internet atheists, new atheists — who think belief in God is on the same level as belief in fairies, leprechauns, and flying spaghetti monsters. And there are other voices — fideists, anti-intellectualists, naïve believers — who equate the evidence for God with the evidence for a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. Both views are extreme, and both are mistaken.

Faith in God is a reasonable faith. We want our kids to see that Christianity is true to the way things are — that it corresponds to reality. We also want them to see Christ as good and beautiful, and we hope that the gospel satisfies their longings in a way that nothing else will. We want them to know *what* they believe and *why* they believe it. We want them to love the right things in the right way. In short, we want our kids to learn apologetics. It is not an easily achievable task to retain the attention span of children for a lecture in apologetics, but there are three ways we teach our kids apologetics without them even knowing it.

INTENTIONAL INTERACTION

First, *during the natural rhythms of daily life, we try to ask intentional questions of our kids*. We discovered when they were young that an important part of learning about their faith was to ask them questions and then actively listen to their answers. Many significant conversations occur over the dinner table each night. With our phones set aside in another room, I (Paul) often will initiate our conversation with the question, "How have you experienced God's fingerprint in your life today?" While our kids sometimes struggle to find an answer, the question has taught them — and us — to be attentive to the divine in the midst of the mundane. The question also reminds our family that God is present and active in our lives right now — not just in the lives of the

people we read about in the Bible. We want our kids to know that God cares about their classes, friendships, and extracurricular activities.

Make Space for Pondering the Sacred

Family hikes also provide a broad springboard for conversations about our faith. The evidence for God lurks under every rock, jars us from our to-do lists through the jabs of a woodpecker, and glides by us in the clouds. The breeze, rock, and woodpecker are God's creative trail markers to Himself. Daily, millions of signposts point to God's existence. We often say to our kids, "Look at how creative God is," while we enjoy the red cliffs at Palo Duro Canyon or the tiny grooves engraved on a seashell. Spending time in creation gives us the opportunity to wonder at God. Creation reveals His goodness, might, and creativity. God didn't have to paint stripes on a zebra or a fish or a sunset, but He chose to in order to delight us and point to Himself.

As our kids have grown older, the dialogue has grown more complex: "What about Darwinian survival of the fittest? Nature, not God, painted those stripes on the zebra" (or so the discussion might go). So we press deeper: Darwinian evolution might account for the zebra's stripes (and the variety of stripes among zebras), but it can't obviously account for the evolution of one species to another or the existence of zebras, amoebas, or other living organisms in the first place.[1] Where did life come from? Darwinism has little to say on this, although, Lord knows, Darwinians have tried to find a naturalistic explanation for life's origin.

If Darwinism is conjoined, as it often is, with materialism, a deeper problem surfaces concerning the intelligibility of what J. P. Moreland calls "the Grand Story" of materialistic evolution.[2] The problem was nicely pointed out by C. S. Lewis in his book *Miracles*: "Thus a strict materialism refutes itself for the reason given long ago by Professor Haldane: 'If my mental processes are determined wholly by the motions of atoms in my brain, I have no reason to suppose that my beliefs are true…and hence I have no reason for supposing my brain to be composed of atoms.'"[3] Lewis notes a deep conflict between the Grand Story of materialistic evolution and the reliability of our cognitive faculties.[4]

The point: we begin where our children are and gently move them to deeper levels of understanding, tension, and complexity as they learn about God, themselves, and the world. The key is intentionality.

We want to poke and prod our kids to see the world in its proper light: everything is sacred. Everything is created. The world is enchanted. These observations teach us to notice God. We want our kids to see God in the everyday things we take for granted. Why does the smell of vanilla remind us of home? Why does the crackle of pine needles under our feet evoke whiffs of transcendence? These gifts are aspects of reality best explained by a God who creates, sustains, and lovingly cares for that which He made.

We employ these echoes of transcendence to generate questions about God. For example, how does the existence of the world itself point to a first cause (the cosmological argument)? How does the beneficial order in the world point to a designer (the teleological argument)? And how does the reality of moral obligations and values point to a moral Lawgiver (the moral argument)? Likewise, the reality of freedom, consciousness, beauty, diversity, logic, flavor, knowledge, color, and more all point to the divine.

Answering Their Questions

The daily drive to and from school and their other activities also gives us important time to listen to our kids and ask them questions about their world. When my kids open the car door, I (Ethel) frequently turn off the radio. I want minimal distractions so I can focus on them. My daughter recently shared about a new student at school who lost both her parents. As Mattie grappled with the consequences of evil in her friend's life, I realized that my response to her struggle laid the foundation for how she will process suffering in her life. Philosophers call this the problem of evil. In times like these, our kids naturally ask, "Why does God allow pain and suffering?"

As Peter Kreeft argues in his book *Making Sense of Suffering*, God's answer to the problem of evil is Christ on the cross.[5] When our kids experience times of pain and suffering, we want to recognize these moments as opportunities. They allow us to explore God's loving care and help us to learn to trust in His goodness. We first need to listen to our children's pain and allow them to express any feelings of disappointment before we try to correct their ideas about God. After our kids feel heard and their emotions and doubts validated, we can remind them — and ourselves — that God alone offers hope. We, like the bedtime stories we've read to our children, play a part in a fairy tale — except this story, because of Jesus, is true and has the best possible ending. As Frederick Buechner explains, "It is a world where the battle goes ultimately to the good, who live happily ever after, and where in the long run everybody, good and evil alike, becomes known by his true name."[6] Perseverance is made a little easier if we are reminded of the ending. That's the promise of the cross — one day all tears will be wiped away by our Savior. The experience of angst is a classroom to teach kids how to turn to Christ and point others to Him as the only hope in the face of evil.

DEVELOP TRADITIONS

Second, *family traditions that embody important truths of our faith also help us teach our kids about God*. Holidays provide natural opportunities to teach apologetics to children. When our kids were younger, we made resurrection cookies that look like little empty tombs. While mixing the ingredients, we read passages of Scripture detailing Jesus' last moments on the cross and anticipated the good news of the risen Christ.

The resurrection cookies symbolize more than a tool to discuss our faith with our kids. They've helped shape our family identity. Many other traditions contribute to

forging this identity. Advent brings nightly Scripture reading, carol singing, and family prayer time.

At Thanksgiving, we reflect on God's provision as we list on leaves those things we are thankful for and build a "tree of thankfulness." Birthday celebrations come loaded with a madeto-order breakfast (monkey bread and breakfast tacos are at the top of the list), family games, and a dinner where each family member shares the qualities they love about the birthday boy or girl. All of these traditions, rooted in the historical realities of the Christian faith, as well as a sacramental view of the world, forge our family identity as followers of Christ.

CULTIVATE THE IMAGINATION

Finally, *encourage your kids to love stories*. We want our kids to revel in story, so we've read to them from the time they were born. Tim Keller in his book *King's Cross* quotes theologian Robert W. Jenson, who "argued that our culture is in a crisis because the modern world 'has lost its story.'"[7] Keller goes on to say, "The gospel is the ultimate story that shows victory coming out of defeat, strength coming out of weakness, life coming out of death, rescue from abandonment. And because it is a true story, it gives us hope because we know life is really like that."[8] When our children fall in love with story, their hearts are prepared to recognize the best and truest story of all — the gospel.

Through reading, we imagine and then enter into the experience the storyteller spins for us. David Foster Wallace gives us another reason to read to our children: "But if a piece of fiction can allow us imaginatively to identify with a character's pain, we might then also more easily conceive of others identifying with our own. This is nourishing, redemptive; we become less alone inside."[9]

Listening to another's victories and trials helps us feel compassion for those whose circumstances are different than our own. I (Ethel) recently read Tolkien's *The Fellowship of the Ring* for the first time. I mentioned to my nine-year-old Josh that two characters stood out to me because they refused to possess the ring. They were afraid of its power combined with their own. Josh was also revisiting Middle-earth in his imagination. He asked me what power meant. I thought for a minute, and then I asked him about the popular kids in his class. We agreed that they have a special kind of power to encourage, motivate toward good, or hurt the feelings of other kids. Our deep conversation about loving others, despite their social status or power, came from the truths in a story. Reading stories fosters empathy in us and helps put flesh on the bones of the second commandment.

C. S. Lewis put it this way, "In reading great literature I become a thousand men and yet remain myself. Like the night sky in the Greek poem, I see with a myriad eyes, but it is still I who see."[10] Through stories, our kids expand their horizons, imagining what it is like to be a South African (*Cry, The Beloved Country*), a slave (*Uncle Tom's*

Cabin), a hero on a quest (*The Odyssey*), an intelligent boy thrust into manhood (*Carry On, Mr. Bowditch*), part of an epic battle (*The Lord of the Rings*), and so much more. Reading novels, biographies, and now…wait for it…*theology and apologetics* develops in our kids, without their realizing it, a thirst for truth, goodness, and beauty.

Some may think they must have a degree in apologetics to teach their children the reasonableness and desirability of Christianity. We believe imparting the foundations of our faith can be easy — natural even — if a little creativity and intentionality is added to the normal rhythm of family life. Evil, God's existence, His attributes, Jesus, the resurrection — all the main topics in the apologetic toolbox — are poked and prodded in tangible ways by families through intentional questions, family traditions, and the reading and telling of stories.

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NOTES

1 For an excellent survey of the various positions atheists and Christians hold with respect to the origin of the universe, life, species, and humans, see Gerald Rau, *Mapping the Origins Debate* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012).
2 2 J. P. Moreland, "Naturalism and the Ontological Status of Properties," *Naturalism: A Critical Analysis*, ed. William Lane Craig and J. P. Moreland (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 75.
3 3 C. S. Lewis, *Miracles* (New York: Touchstone, 1975), 24.
4 4 Alvin Plantinga has advanced a more rigorous argument highlighting the selfdefeating nature of the Grand Story of materialistic evolution in *Where the Conflict Really Lies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), chap. 10.
5 Peter Kreeft, *Making Sense of Suffering* (Ann Arbor, MI: Servant Books, 1986).
6 Frederick Buechner, *Telling the Truth: The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy, and Fairy Tale* (New York: Harper One, 1977), 7.
7 Timothy Keller, *King's Cross* (New York: Dutton, 2011), 229. Original quote from Robert W. Jenson, "How the World Lost Its Story," *First Things* 36 (October 1993): 19–24.
8 Ibid., 230.
9 Larry McCaffery, "A Conversation with David Foster Wallace," in *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* 13, 2, Summer 1993, http://www.dalkeyarchive.com/aconversation with-david-foster-wallace-by-larry-mccaffery/.

10 C. S. Lewis, *An Experiment*