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TEACHING APOLOGETICS TO THE NEXT GENERATION

by Sean McDowell

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Before becoming a graduate professor of apologetics last year, I spent a decade teaching apologetics full time to high school students at a Christian school in Southern California. In fact, I still teach one high school Bible class simply because *I love it!* I also have the privilege of speaking to thousands of young people each year on all sorts of apologetics-related subjects. There are some lessons I have learned—many the hard way—about how to teach apologetics to young people. I trust these will be helpful and encouraging as you aim to equip and challenge the next generation.

DOES APOLOGETICS STILL MATTER?

It is not uncommon to read a blog or hear a speaker denounce the importance of apologetics today. In fact, many have claimed we live in a postmodern culture in which apologetics no longer matters. Yet William Lane Craig is right—this sort of thinking is a disastrous misdiagnosis of contemporary culture.¹ Ironically, we have witnessed the emergence of an apologetics renaissance right when many critics claimed postmodernism made apologetics passé.

And much of the interest in apologetics comes from young people. I have witnessed this in the classroom, but I am also frequently barraged by apologetics questions from young people as I speak at churches, conferences, schools, and camps nationwide. When they realize that I care and respect them as individuals, students express a variety of questions and doubts.

Youth experts Kara Powell and Chap Clark launched a multiyear research project examining the transition of Christian students beyond high school. They discovered that students who felt the freedom to express their doubts tended to have a “sticky faith,” which means they maintain their faith after high school. Powell and Clark narrowed down the top ten doubts college students remembered having in high school. Not surprisingly, they included the existence of God, the problem of suffering and evil, the exclusivity of Christ, and the reality of hell.²

This does not mean apologetics questions are necessarily at the forefront of students’ minds. Yet it does indicate that, like the rest of us, young people want to make sense of the world and to find their place in it. So how do we motivate students to care about ultimate questions of truth?

MOTIVATING STUDENTS

There is no magic bullet that will motivate all students to care about truth. Some students may not be in a place in their lives where they are spiritually receptive. Does this mean we give up on those students? No way! I was once frustrated that I couldn’t engage a certain student. My principal gave me some words of wisdom that really helped: “Give yourself a break. Some people even walked away unconvinced after personally encountering Jesus.” He was right. The rich young ruler walked away from personally talking with Jesus because he did not want to give up his wealth (Matt. 19:16–22).

This was a freeing revelation for me since I often took it personally when students disengaged from my class. But after teaching for a few years, I now realize that seeds are planted in the hearts of many students even when they have a “whatever” attitude about spiritual matters.

One time a former student visited my class after he began studying at a local junior college. I was shocked this student returned to my class because he seemed totally disengaged in high school. When I asked him what I could have done differently to help motivate him more in high school, he replied, “Honestly, Mr. McDowell, probably nothing. I didn’t realize how important it was back then. But I did learn a lot more than you might think.”

While some students may not be as spiritually receptive as we would like, there are some helpful steps we can take to motivate students in apologetics. When these steps are taken, many young people will respond enthusiastically.

Use Cultural Issues to “Hook” Students

Apologetics and theology can often seem distant from the daily lives of students, but they love it when we make a connection with pop culture. It helps them realize that the questions of the Bible are *exactly* the same questions being asked today. I regularly look for YouTube videos, recent articles, or movie clips when teaching on an apologetics subject.

Relationships Matter

I spend a lot of time getting to know my students. I regularly attend sporting events and school plays. I even frequently have students over to my house to meet my family and have dinner. The more I get to know students, and see their real struggles and dreams, the more I earn the right to speak truth into their lives. They know I care about them and are much more willing to listen.

Get Students Out of Their Comfort Zones

I have brought in Mormons, atheists, and others to speak to my students.³ It's also helpful to get students out of the church to visit mosques, temples, and university campuses. With the help of my friend Brett Kunkle—student impact speaker for Stand to Reason—we use surveys that help foster great spiritual conversations with nonbelievers on college campuses.⁴ He also leads some apologetics mission trips, if you're *really* serious about training your students.⁵

Ask Good Questions and Refuse to Give Simple Answers

A question is *almost* always better than an answer. Questions create conversation in which we learn what a young person is really thinking. Questions also help students discover answers for themselves. I used to answer every question students asked me. Now I typically say something like, "Wow, good question. What motivates you to ask that question?" I try to ask questions that reveal their underlying assumptions so I can help guide them to personally discover truth on their own.

Be Intentional about Your Scope and Sequence

Having a scope and sequence in your teaching is critical for helping students develop a biblical worldview. Obviously there are many ways to do this well. The key is to have a logical approach that connects lessons, units, and years. The sequence below worked

well at my Christian school, and could easily be adapted for a small group or youth group setting:

Ninth Grade: Old Testament Survey. This class focuses on the key people, places, and events throughout the Hebrew Scriptures. The goal is to help them understand the *big picture* of the Old Testament rather than get caught in the minutiae. Tons of apologetics issues arise in the Old Testament, such as creation, prophecy, genocide, and sexual morality that we address along the way.

Tenth Grade: New Testament Survey. In this class, students learn about the context, themes, and key people in the New Testament. Students also learn about evidences for the historical Jesus and the reliability of the New Testament.

Eleventh Grade: Systematic Theology, Cults, and World Religions. Students learn key doctrinal issues the first semester (i.e., doctrine of God, man, angels, revelation, etc.). Once students grasp core theology, we consider various cults, which inevitably twist at least *one* essential doctrine. Then students learn about key world religions such as Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism with a focus on God's heart for the unsaved.

Twelfth Grade: Apologetics and Worldview. Students learn about various worldviews (nihilism, postmodernism, etc.), intelligent design, current ethical issues, and then end by discussing *Mere Christianity*.⁶

Deliver Your Lessons Effectively

Once you have a general plan in place, the key is to prepare and deliver each lesson effectively. Here are some teaching methods, which can be uniquely adapted to your group's needs. (There are also some quality "plug and play" apologetics curricula that may help.⁷)

Lecture. Despite claims that students have short attention spans, this remains one valuable pedagogical method. Four things are particularly helpful when preparing lectures. First, simplify content as much as possible. Avoid using big words unless absolutely necessary. Second, intersperse stories, illustrations, and short videos throughout the lecture. Third, prepare your content adequately. Do your homework so

you can present the material in a logical and sequential manner. Finally, have a quiz at the end, or some kind of reward, to encourage focus and participation. You might even ask another adult to observe who can give you helpful feedback for next time.

Discussion. When a safe environment is created and the teacher asks good questions, students love to discuss. The key is to get students discussing by asking thought-provoking questions and resisting the urge to give *your* thoughts.⁸

Case Studies. Put students in small groups of six to eight, set up a specific scenario, and see how they will respond. For instance: “You are a Christian owner of a bakery. You are asked to bake a cake in celebration of a same-sex wedding. Can you think of any biblical stories or principles that apply to this scenario? Would you bake the cake? Why or why not? If not, how would you respond to the same-sex couple?” After a few minutes, debrief the whole group together by comparing and contrasting responses.

Movies. This is one of the best ways to both interest students and get them thinking. I often show whole movies, or scenes of movies, when teaching apologetics. For instance, the 2009 *Sherlock Holmes* film powerfully portrays the worldview of naturalism by highlighting how all the supposed supernatural events, including a resurrection, can be explained away by science.⁹

Videos. There are many quality videos that teach apologetics issues. Personally, I am a big fan of Illustra Media. I regularly show their intelligent design movies in part or whole to my class.¹⁰

Role-Playing. One of my favorite ways to engage my students is through role-playing an atheist, pro-choice advocate, Muslim, or a variety of other personas. I sometimes even dress the part. There are some online samples that may help visualize how this can be done.¹¹

Guest Speaker. Even though I am a public speaker, my students still love it when I bring in an interesting guest speaker. Your church and community are likely filled with people who have interesting stories and expertise in a variety of apologetics issues. Here are some suggestions: a scientist, convert from another religion, public figure, ex-

gay, college professor, former student. You can invite the person to speak, or interview him/her with prepared questions that would be most relevant and interesting to your students.

Surveys. I regularly take my students onto college campuses to interact with people of other belief systems. The purpose is for education and to get students used to having spiritual conversations. Be sure to debrief the group as a whole immediately afterward.

Visit Another Religious Site. In teaching comparative religions, it is helpful to get students to meet people of other faiths personally and to learn firsthand about their practices. I have taken students to mosques and Mormon churches. Every visit has been eye opening and memorable. Just remember to emphasize *respectful behavior* to your students.

Apologetics Conferences. There are now a plethora of outstanding apologetics conferences where students can hear from experts in the field.¹² Think about taking students to the next apologetics conference near you. The value of these conferences is in getting students out of the classroom and into a different environment where thoughtful believers surround them.

Students need apologetics training more than ever before. This will take some hard work on your part, but what's the alternative? Losing more of our kids to the culture? The church must equip its most precious resource—its children and youth—to become the future thought leaders and culture shapers our broken world so desperately needs. Are you ready to go?

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NOTES

- 1 William Lane Craig, "God Is Not Dead Yet," *Christianity Today*, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2008/july/13.22.html?paging=off>.
- 2 Kara E. Powell and Chap Clark, *Sticky Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 70–71.
- 3 Be sure to get the support of your pastor and/or principal. Also, be sure you lay the groundwork ahead of time for both the students and your guest. These kinds of conversations can unravel quickly if expectations of civility and respect are not clearly articulated.
- 4 Conversational Survey 1: <http://www.seanmcdowell.org/index.php/teaching-youth/conversational-survey-1/>. Conversational Survey 2: <http://www.seanmcdowell.org/index.php/teaching-youth/conversational-survey-2/>.
- 5 Brett Kunkle has developed apologetics mission trips for students to Berkeley, Salt Lake City, and more. He trains students before the trip, and then guides them through it. Nothing I have done in youth ministry challenges and equips students as well as these trips.
- 6 The texts we use for twelfth-grade Bible class are: (1) James Sire, *The Universe Next Door*; (2) William Dembski and Sean McDowell, *Understanding Intelligent Design*; (3) Sean McDowell, *Ethix: Being Bold in a Whatever World*, and (4) *Mere Christianity*, by C. S. Lewis.
- 7 If you are looking for an introductory apologetics DVD series for students, check out GodQuest: godquestoutreach.com. For a more advanced and in-depth series, I recommend True U (trueu.org). I also recommend the "Ask" by RZIM: rzimask.org.
- 8 To help lead quality discussions, see the article by Torrey Honors Institute (Biola) professor Fred Sanders entitled, "What's a Good Question?" April 28, 2014: <http://scriptoriumdaily.com/whats-a-good-question/>.
- 9 For an introductory text on discerning apologetics and worldview messages in film, see Douglas M. Beaumont, *The Message behind the Movie* (Chicago: Moody, 2009).
- 10 See www.illustramedia.com for engaging and top quality films on intelligent design.
- 11 Here is a link to my "Atheist Encounter" where I role-played an atheist during a church service in Michigan: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JNql36qIExA>. Brett Kunkle also does a great job role-playing a Mormon: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K8Rsp7Zgyxs>.
- 12 The Biola Christian Apologetics Department, where I am an assistant professor, hosts about eight to ten apologetics conferences nationwide each year. You can see upcoming events here: <http://www.biola.edu/academics/sas/apologetics/events/>. I would also highly recommend the "Re-Think" youth apologetics conferences sponsored by Stand to Reason: rethinkapologetics.com.