

Apology Accepted

By Adam Tucker

(This is a slightly edited version of the breakout session from the 2009 ARLM National Conference.

All Scripture quotations are from the HCSB unless otherwise noted.)

Does God exist? Are miracles possible? Can I trust the Bible? Is Jesus the only way? Why is there evil?

People have questions, and I'm sure you do too. I know I do. Have you ever thought about the above questions? Do you have any answers?

Give these two questions some thought: Why are you a Christian? Why should anyone else be a Christian? Rather than give good answers to these and other similar questions, we often give pat answers that either are no answers at all or simply insult the intelligence of the person with whom we are speaking. Allow me to give an example.

In a June 23, 2009 devotional from a nationally known ministry, the following thoughts were put forth both on their website and in their national radio spots:

“Today’s society is asking...Does Jesus work?

Well, I’m just a country girl with a husband and 5 kids. I’m not a theologian and I don’t have a PhD. I’m just a woman who dared to utter one little word that shifted my heart and set my soul on the adventure I was designed to live. I simply said ‘Yes’ to Jesus. All I have to show the world that Jesus works is my one little ‘yes’ and a story of what happened when an ordinary woman dared to utter it. And it has been enough.

It’s enough for all of us. **The only thing we need in order to share Jesus with others is the reality of what He’s done in our lives.** The more we learn to live like Him, the more the world will see Him and know that Jesus ABSOLUTELY works!”

I typically like the material that this organization puts out, but I was quite disappointed in this devotion. It serves to illustrate what I believe is an alarming trend among Evangelicals in general and Southern Baptists specifically. Most of our evangelism efforts today center around our personal testimonies. You know the drill: Tell them what your life was like before you met Jesus, tell them how you came to know Jesus, and then tell them how Jesus has changed your life. It sounds like the old hymn, “You ask me how I know He lives, He lives within my heart!”

Now please do not misunderstand me. Testimonies are extremely important and valuable. If you do not have one, then perhaps you should consider checking your spiritual condition. God can certainly use your testimony to bring people to Himself, but does that mean our testimonies are the only, or even the best, way to share Christ with others? After all, God also used adultery in the life of David to bring Jesus into the world. I think we would all agree, however, that this fact does not mean we should all go commit adultery!

My question is, is a testimony enough? Is that really “the only thing we need”? What Jesus has done in your life may be a good reason for you to be a Christian (and I may even argue that point with you), but is it a good reason for someone else to become a Christian? You see, there is a glaring problem with relying on our testimonies as our primary evangelistic tool: EVERYBODY HAS ONE!

The Mormon has a testimony, and it is their primary means of establishing what they believe to be the truthfulness of Mormonism. The Jehovah’s Witness, Scientologist, and Muslim all have a testimony. Even the atheist has a testimony, and often times it is a story of someone’s “deconversion” from a Southern Baptist church! These other belief systems live out what they say they believe as well.

As of my last observation, the International Mission Board had 4,946 missionaries on the ground, the North American Mission Board had 5,081 missionaries, and the Southern Baptist Convention had 88,000 trained Disaster Relief volunteers all doing great work and living out their faith throughout the world. This is wonderful! But did you know that the Mormon church has about 50,000 missionaries worldwide at any one time and that they have given nearly \$300 million in humanitarian donations since 1985. Likewise, the Jehovah’s Witnesses average over 1.5 billion volunteer Bible education hours and just over 7.5 million weekly home Bible studies per year. The church of Scientology claims to have 100,000 volunteer ministers representing every continent on earth. There is even an atheist relief organization called A+.

So who is the non-Christian supposed to believe? According to the logic of the devotional referenced earlier, if “the only thing we need” is a changed life, then apparently all of these beliefs must be true! Of course, that is precisely what much of our society thinks. In a May 2009 *Parade Magazine* spirituality poll of 1,051 respondents, 12% said their own religion was the only true faith, 12% said no religion has validity, and 59% said ALL religions are valid. Of course, anyone with common sense should know that opposite ideas cannot both be true at the same time and in the same sense. All of these religions cannot be true because they teach opposite ideas, but why should someone believe our testimony over the Mormon’s or someone else’s?

That is why knowing WHY you believe WHAT you believe is so important! We may get people interested in Christianity through our lifestyles, our love, our acts of service, and even our testimonies, but I would argue that is not enough. We must also provide justification to them that what we proclaim is objectively true. Jesus said they would know we belong to Him by our love, but He did not say they will know what we say is true by our love.

Perhaps you are thinking, “The Bible just calls us to preach the Gospel, and only the Holy Spirit can draw people to God.” While it is true that the Holy Spirit alone can bring someone into a saving relationship with God, we could use that same logic and argue that we do not even half to preach! The Holy Spirit leads people to trust IN Christ as Savior, but God calls us to help people believe THAT He is a Savior in the first place. The same Bible that tells us to preach the Gospel also tells us to defend it, as we will see shortly. The art of defending the Gospel and knowing why we believe what we believe is known as *apologetics*.

Apologetics does not mean being sorry that you are a Christian! In classical terms, *apology* means to give an explanation or an answer. So remember that the next time someone apologizes to you rather than saying they are sorry! Apologetics comes from the Greek word *apologia*, and it means to give a defense in the sense of a courtroom type appeal. I would define *apologetics* as: The discipline which deals with a rational defense of Christianity; giving a reason or justification of one’s beliefs; use of evidences and sound reasoning to reach individuals for Christ. It is both offensive (i.e. giving reasons why we believe Christianity is true and reasonable) and defensive (i.e. answering objections from critics, pointing out bad reasoning and poor philosophy).

This is often one the most overlooked aspects of the Christian life. In a June 2010 interview with *The Christian Post*, popular Christian apologist Josh McDowell said in his 50 years of ministry he has asked several thousand Christian pastors and leaders how they could be certain Jesus said “I am the truth” and not one of many truths. He said, “Not one person has ever given me an intelligent, biblically-based answer.” He went on to say, “Lies change lives; cults change lives... We owe it to ourselves, we owe it to our children, we owe it to our neighbors, we owe it to the lost, to tell them not just what we believe but why do we believe it.” **That is why I believe apologetics is an essential element of a complete view of biblical evangelism because of three crucial reasons.**

Reason 1. God Commands It

Like I said earlier, the same Bible that tells us to preach the Gospel also tells us to defend it. Paul says in 2 Tim. 4:2, “Proclaim the message; persist in it whether convenient or not; rebuke, correct, and encourage with great patience and teaching.” Do you recall what Jesus said the greatest commandment of all is? He said in Matt. 22:37, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and

with *all your mind*.” God, who is rational by nature, created us in His image as rational beings. He does not expect us to check our minds at the door in order to be a Christian.

God has not called us to a blind faith. The classic verse used by apologists is 1 Pet. 3:15, “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*...” (NIV). One of my favorites is Jude 3, “Dear friends, although I was very eager to write to you about the salvation we share, I felt I had to write and urge you to *contend for the faith* that was once for all entrusted to the saints” (NIV). The word *contend* comes from the Greek word *epagonizomai* which conveys the idea of contending as a combatant. After all, we are in a spiritual war of ideas. Defending the faith is not always easy, but it is necessary, even commanded, and worth the effort.

Paul says in 2 Tim. 2:24-26, “The Lord's slave must not quarrel, but must be gentle to everyone, *able to teach*, and patient, *instructing his opponents* with gentleness. Perhaps God will grant them repentance to *know the truth*. Then they may come to their senses and escape the Devil's trap, having been captured by him to do his will.” I try to make this my life verse, even though I am far from living it consistently. I like this verse because I believe it shows the Holy Spirit's work, our work, and the person's own free will in action. I also think this verse brings up an important distinction between quarreling and arguing.

Many people do not like apologetics because they think it is all about arguing. It is true, simply based on the above, that we are not to quarrel in that we should not be argumentative and disagreeable in a rude and disrespectful way. A real argument, however, is simply a structured group of statements meant to persuade the hearer to a particular point of view. That is precisely what we are called to do as ambassadors of Christ.

In as many or more places in Scripture as we are commanded to share our faith, we are commanded to defend our faith and give reasons for why we believe. We could look at many more passages where we're commanded to demolish arguments against God and examine everything carefully. Why does God command us to defend the faith? I believe, in part at least, because of reason number two.

Reason 2. The Church and Family Need It

Richard Dawkins, currently perhaps the world's most public and outspoken atheist, said, “Faith is the great cop-out, the great excuse to evade the need to think and evaluate evidence. Faith is belief in spite of, even perhaps because of, the lack of evidence.” Mark Twain put it this way, “Faith is believing what you know ain't so.” Likewise, many people in our culture have the impression that faith is equivalent to wishful thinking of superstition. You either have faith, or you use reason, but the two can never go

together. That is certainly the kind of thinking our young people are being fed in the universities, and unfortunately that is what many people in our churches think!

As perhaps you are aware, anywhere from 60-75% of teenagers leave the church after graduating from high school. There are many reasons for this, but one big reason is intellectual doubt. Think about that. Our kids could go to church every Sunday, attend every youth group or children's club meeting, and they could still leave college without any grounding for the truthfulness of what they thought they believed. The church has got to step up and equip the flock to know why Christianity is true. This grounding must also take place in the home. Yet, according to the pollster Barna, only 9% of Christian adults have a Christian worldview, and I would guess fewer than that could actually give a reasonable defense for what they say they believe.

This was made even more clear to me when I learned about a doctoral dissertation from a Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary student. In his research, the doctoral student surveyed former Southern Baptists who had converted to Mormonism in attempt to determine the cause of their drastic change. The student discovered the number one reason they converted was because of unanswered questions about the Christian faith.

We must recognize that the popular understanding of faith is simply false and certainly not biblical. Remember I asked you, "Why are you a Christian?" A lot of people, probably the majority of Christians, believe the right things about God but for no good reason. Many think their beliefs are true simply because they believe them! Again, McDowell says, "Where did we ever get the crazy idea that faith makes something true? That's idiotic. That's so unbiblical you can call it heresy."

Paul said in 1 Cor. 15:16, 21, "And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins...But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep." Earlier in that chapter we see that he appealed to evidence to establish the objective historical fact of Jesus' resurrection. He was looking at reality and objective facts, unlike many in the church today who would rather rely on their feelings or someone's personal experience rather than on the very words of God which we have reason to believe are objectively true. As a good friend of mine says, there are no brownie points in heaven for being an ignorant Christian. If our wishful thinking, superstitious, and experientially driven faith is all someone has to hold on to, how will they ever live out Eph. 4:14 where Paul says, "Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming"?

What exactly is *biblical* faith then? The word *faith* is better translated as *trust* or *trustworthy*. I would define biblical faith as a conviction based on evidence and reason that gives us confidence that what

God says is true, and that confidence results in the willful action of trusting Him, even though we cannot see everything. Christian apologist Greg Koukl put it this way, “Faith is not what we fall back to when reason isn't available. It's the conviction of what we have reason to believe.”

Yes, we are to love God with all our hearts, but that is the least emphasized aspect of Christianity in the Bible. In fact, God gives us warnings about “following our hearts.” Proverbs 14:12 says, “There is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end it leads to death.” Jeremiah 17:9 says, “The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?” Our emotions and feelings change, and some days I may not feel like God is doing a work in my life. C.S. Lewis put it well, “Faith is the art of holding on to things your reason has once accepted, in spite of your changing moods.” Apologetics helps provide those reasons and evidences.

So God commands the use of apologetics, in part at least, because the church and family need it. Why does the church and family need it? I am glad you asked because that leads us to our final reason.

Reason 3. The World Deserves It

We all know we are called to share the Good News with a lost and dying world as ambassadors of Christ. While no one deserves grace, as ambassadors of Christ the world does deserve for us to share a reasonable faith. As we established at the beginning, people, including you and me, have questions. Honest questions and disagreements deserve good and honest answers and reasons.

The danger, in my opinion, is that we are often times sharing a deficient Gospel. The Gospel itself is certainly not deficient. It is “God’s power for salvation to everyone who believes” (Rom. 1:16). Rather, I think our presentation of the Gospel is often deficient. If God loves people enough to die for them, how can we not be careful to present a complete Gospel message?

One of the problems involved with sharing the Gospel is that this task involves interpersonal communication, and in our pluralistic society communication can be a very dangerous thing. Allow me to illustrate. I imagine you would all agree with this statement: *Jesus Christ is God, He was crucified and died, and He was resurrected from the dead.* That seems like a very simple Gospel presentation. Did you know, however, that the Jehovah’s Witness would likely agree with you? She would mean, however, that Jesus is a “mighty god” (the first of Jehovah’s creation) and that He was spiritually resurrected from the dead. The Mormon would likely agree, but he would mean that Jesus is our spirit brother, and Satan’s too by the way, that He was physically begotten in Mary’s womb through sexual intercourse, that He is god in some sense, and that if we believe in Him we too can become like God and have our own spirit children and rule over our own worlds. Finally, the New Ager would mean Jesus was “Christ” and “God” just as we all can be, His “spiritual blood” was spilled out into the “spiritual earth,” and the

resurrection is “Christ consciousness” rising up out of the “spiritual earth” and leading all mankind to enlightenment of their own divinity.

I hope you see the problem. Words have meaning, and sometimes simply sharing the Gospel or our testimonies without being clear about our words can be a dangerous thing. If faith is only as good as its object, and if people put their faith in “another Jesus,” which Paul warns about in Gal. 1:8, can we say they are saved? Ultimately, that is between them and God since we cannot know exactly what they are believing. But it does beg the question, what must be believed in order to be saved?

Certain things must be TRUE in order to be saved (ex. inerrancy of Scripture, Christ’s humanity and virgin birth), but other things must not only be true but also BELIEVED. It is clear in both Old and New Testaments that one must believe: that he needs salvation, that the God of the Bible exists, that salvation is dependent on God’s grace, and that he must trust in God. But the Bible is a progressive revelation, and there are certain facts that must be believed in order for people today to be saved.

For the sake of space I will simply refer you to Rom. 10:9 and 1 Cor. 15:1-8 as example texts of what must be believed today for salvation. Given the progressive revelation of the Bible it appears that people today MUST believe: that Jesus is God (implying the Trinity), that He died physically, and that He was physically resurrected. This does not mean we must completely understand all these things, but I think it does mean that we cannot willfully reject these essentials.

Does a testimony cover this information? Maybe, maybe not. Perhaps they already believed many of the above items and your testimony simply put them over the top on their road to salvation. That is wonderful! But even if that is the case, why should someone believe it for no good reason?

As much emphasis as we put on testimonies, you would think it is mandated in the Bible to use them. Do a study of the Book of Acts. No where is a personal testimony used in an *evangelistic* encounter. It has been said that what we call apologetics the early church would have called evangelism! Read Peter’s words in Acts 2:22-25. This was a moment where the Holy Spirit did a mighty work, but notice what Peter says. He refers to miracles, the resurrection, and fulfilled prophecy. He never mentions how he feels clean or new or how Jesus works for him. His audience’s repentance was expected in light of the FACTS not their FEELINGS.

What about Paul? Surely if anyone had a testimony to share and rely on it was Paul! Yet what does Paul constantly do? The New Testament says he reasoned with, persuaded, debated, and convinced his listeners. He was a Christian case-maker as we all should be.

My fear is that sometimes we are far too concerned with getting someone to “pray the prayer” as if the “sinner’s prayer” contains magic words. There is nothing necessarily wrong with the prayer, but we have all heard someone say, “I don’t know if they’re saved, but they prayed the prayer!” It kind of sounds similar to the Islamic Shahada, which is the first pillar of Islam. It says, “I witness that there is no god but Allah, and Muhammad is the messenger of Allah.” Does saying these words automatically make someone a Muslim? I said those words while giving this presentation. Am I now a Muslim? Koukl comments, “I fear we’ve inoculated a whole generation of people who got a partial injection of Christianity and are now resistant to the real thing. They prayed the sinner’s prayer, got their ‘fire insurance,’ and then disappeared, never to be seen again. When confronted with the Gospel anew they shrug, ‘Been there, done that. Now leave me alone. I have a life to live.’ The focus of evangelism should never be praying the prayer, but following Jesus. When we emphasize deciding for Christ instead of living for Him, we often get spiritual miscarriages instead of spiritual births. Our sense of safety can’t come from simply saying a magic prayer.” We are certainly not advocating a works based Gospel. We are saved by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. The point is simply that we often play on people’s emotions in order to get them to pray a prayer they may not really understand in the first place.

The world deserves better from Christ’s ambassadors. We must proclaim and defend the complete Gospel so that people can accept or reject Christianity based on what it really is and not some caricature of it they have in their minds. Apologetics helps with that!

That is why I believe apologetics is essential to a complete view of biblical evangelism because God commands it, the church and family need it, and the world deserves it.

So let me ask you once more. Why are you a Christian? I did not initially become a Christian because of this, but I can honestly say now that I am a Christian because it is objectively true. Does Jesus work? Absolutely! Is that a good reason to believe something is true? Absolutely not! As McDowell often says, if something is true it will work, but the fact that something works in some way does not make it true.

Should we give up our testimonies then? Of course not! Your testimony is great evidence that God is real and at work in your life, but it must be grounded in an objective basis of truth. A good testimony should contain both the objective and subjective aspects of trust in Christ:

- 1) This message is true and will affect everyone whether you believe it or not, and here is why.
- 2) This message has changed my life, and here is how.
- 3) One or the other may need to be emphasized, depending on the audience.

Romans 12:2 says, “Do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may discern what is the good, pleasing, and perfect will of God.” Remember, we are called

to love God with all our minds. This is not easy, but it is worth it. This verse has the idea of the butterfly's struggle of metamorphosis in its cocoon. It takes time and effort, but anything of value does. Christian apologist J.P. Holding says, "If we profess to love God, it is only consistent with our profession that we should desire to learn more about Him and His Word. Apologetics should not be regarded as alien to our personal testimony but should become an integral part of it. A man who said he loved his wife but could tell an inquirer almost nothing about her would be rightly regarded with suspicion. We owe no less loyalty to our Lord than to show our love for Him (1 Pet. 3:15) by learning all we can about Him and His message — the 'faith which was once delivered unto the saints' (Jude 1:3)."

You do not have to be an expert in everything, but you do need to be familiar with the common issues and questions, and be familiar with where you can get the answers. I have attached a resource sheet to the end of this document with some of my favorite resources. At the very least, seek out the answers to your own questions. As R.C. Sproul says, we cannot "bypass the mind in an attempt to have a renewed heart." May the Holy Spirit empower us to defend the faith with gentle and respectful boldness, and may our apology be accepted as we seek to present and contend for the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.

**If you would like to dialog about this further, or if you disagree with me and see something I should correct, please feel free to contact me at (336) 908-2696 or adamtuckeronline@me.com*

***Please see the recommended resources on the next page*

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

BOOKS/VIDEOS

- 1) *I Don't Have Enough Faith to Be an Atheist* – Normon Geisler & Frank Turek
- 2) *Five Minute Apologist* – Rick Cornish
- 3) *Is Your Church Ready* – Ravi Zacharias & Norman Geisler
- 4) *The Case for the Real Jesus* – Lee Strobel
- 5) *The Case for a Creator* – Lee Strobel
- 6) *Tactics* – Greg Koukl
- 7) *Reasoning from the Scriptures with Jehovah's Witnesses* – Ron Rhodes
- 8) *Reasoning from the Scriptures with Mormons* – Ron Rhodes
- 9) *The Design of Life* – William Dembski
- 10) *The Ten Most Common Objections to Christianity* – Alex McFarland
- 11) *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus* – Gary Habermas & Mike Licona
- 12) *The New Evidence that Demands a Verdict* – Josh McDowell
- 13) *When Skeptics Ask* – Norman Geisler & Ron Brooks
- 14) *When Critics Ask* – Norman Geisler & Thomas Howe
- 15) *The Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics* – Norman Geisler
- 16) *True U* – www.trueu.org
- 17) *The Truth Project* – www.thetruthproject.org

WEB SITES

- 1) North American Mission Board Apologetics Resources – www.4truth.net
- 2) Stand to Reason – www.str.org
- 3) Stand to Reason Student Ministries – www.strplace.com
- 4) Reasonable Faith – www.reasonablefaith.org
- 5) Always Be Ready – www.alwaysbeready.com
- 6) Christian Research Institute – www.equip.org
- 7) Institute for Religious Research – www.irr.org
- 8) Christian Apologetics & Research Ministry – www.carm.org
- 9) Christian Answers for the New Age – www.christiananswersforthenewage.org
- 10) Ravi Zacharias International Ministries – www.rzim.org