

## Notes for Tactical Faith Talk

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What does an aspiring apologist—a *practical* apologist—need to know? And how should he go about acquiring it?

Story: Erik's dilemma.

- \* No time (or money!) to go to seminary,
- \* but still feels called to do apologetics.

This talk is, in many ways, an extended discussion of what I developed for Erik.

Practical apologetics is *street-level* apologetics: the sort of apologetics work that arises at the level of the church youth group, the college campus, and the family reunion where your atheist brother in law shows up.

For this, the aspiring practical apologist needs several things:

**1. Technique:** the art of guiding a conversation in a winsome manner.

Story: Trey's problem.

- \* Naturally reserved person
- \* Working in an environment where he cannot afford to appear brash; yet felt that backing down or saying nothing would be wrong

For this, I recommend Koukl's award-winning book *Tactics*, though there are also other valuable resources out there.

Trey's experience: the "tactical approach" proved immediately valuable in an unexpected area, talking with an aggressive messianic Jew who insisted that all of the New Testament was originally written in Hebrew (!)

**2. Knowledge:** the information necessary to give a good defense of Christianity and a good response to the many challenges that it faces.

But this is daunting, overwhelming. That was Erik's dilemma. How to begin? Where to begin?

My focus today will be on the "knowledge" side. In particular, I want to discuss

- A. How to think about the major areas of apologetics ("the Map")
- B. How to study as you begin to develop your strengths as an apologist

- C. How to use classic sources to develop your knowledge base and your personal arsenal of apologetic resources.

## The Map

Cross-hatching two distinctions gives us four major areas, with many sub-topics in each area.

General / Biblical Apologetics

Positive / Defensive Apologetics

## How to Study

1. Few people start from scratch. *So start where you are.*
2. First goal: to have *something to say in each area.*

Not the impossible goal of mastering *everything*.

- a. Defensive General Apologetics

Most practical apologetics work, in person or in electronic communication, is defensive apologetics. Most of the people who want to talk to an apologist are either Christians who have encountered challenges they do not know how to meet or else non-Christians who have a variety of reasons (often shockingly bad, but reasons that they personally find persuasive) for rejecting Christianity. A well-trained apologist must, therefore, be prepared to deal with objections.

In my experience, a handful of *general* objections will come up very frequently. These are:

- (1) The problem of evil. God is supposed to be good, and he is supposed to be all-powerful. Why, then, does he allow so many terrible things to happen? Why doesn't he stop them before innocent people are harmed?
- (2) The challenge of science. Darwin has shown us that life in all of its complexity can arise without the need for any intervention or help from God. The Bible says God was required to do it. Since Darwin, God is out of a job.
- (3) The incredibility of miracles. Miracles are, by definition, rare events; a miracle would never be the first thing a rational man would reach for to explain any empirical evidence. Christianity, however, is committed to miracles – centrally and notably, the resurrection of Jesus. Some other explanation of the data must be more plausible than that.

A well-trained apologist must have responses to these three objections.

b. Defensive Biblical Apologetics

When we come to defensive biblical apologetics, the material falls into two broad categories:

- 1) Objections that must be addressed in order to make one's positive case for the resurrection.

The most natural way to argue for Jesus' resurrection is to argue that this is the best explanation for the evidence we possess. Explanatory arguments, however, are always contrastive: to say that the resurrection is the *best* explanation is to say that it is superior to *alternative* explanations. Even in a "minimal facts" argument, one must be prepared to address alternatives that have been put forward seriously – the swoon theory, the wrong tomb theory, the hallucination theory, and so forth. And to defend an argument that takes its stand more squarely on the veracity of the gospels, one must be prepared to answer some of the more common arguments against the historical trustworthiness of the gospels.

- 2) Objections to isolated portions or aspects of scripture that do *not* bear directly on one's positive case for the resurrection.

If you are in the course of making a case for the resurrection, it is worth your while to point out that these are not pertinent to the case you are making. The main danger here is loss of focus – essentially, your argument gets hijacked and turned into a stump-the-Christian session.

Here is one technique you may find useful: take out a sheet of paper and write down objections, but explain that you want to tackle one issue at a time and you're not done yet with the argument for the resurrection. Keep doing this as the rabbit trails are raised. Once you're done with your main argument, you can go back through the list one by one.

c. Positive General Apologetics

For some people, a strong argument for the resurrection, backed up by a solid defense of the portions of the New Testament required for the premises of that argument, suffices to convince them that God exists and Christianity, in its broad outlines, is true. For others, however, it is necessary to prepare the ground with some kind of argument in favor of the existence of God, and only once this possibility is at least a live option will the historical argument for the resurrection appear compelling.

Advice: Pick *one* argument for the existence of God and study it in some detail. Make sure that you can:

- 1) lay it out in a logical form,
- 2) give a reason to accept each of the premises,
- 3) articulate and respond to the most obvious criticisms of the argument.

Which one you pick is a matter of personal choice.

- 1) I have always been attracted to the argument from the *origin of life*;
- 2) Craig has built his career on a strong defense of the *Kalam* argument;
- 3) Many people instinctively find the *moral* argument very persuasive.

Do not try to study everything. If you can make a clear, solid presentation of *one* of these lines of argument, you have something to work with.

d. Positive Biblical Apologetics

- 1) Every Christian who aspires to defend the faith should be able to make some kind of argument for the resurrection.

As Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 15, this is the lynchpin of Christianity; without it, nothing else matters. In our map, this puts us in arguments from scripture for conclusions that go beyond general revelation.

- 2) The well-rounded apologist should be prepared to make some kind of case for the historical veracity of at least some of the New Testament documents.

Experience has shown that people who need to be argued into belief in the resurrection virtually always object to an appeal to the scriptures. An argument *from* them presupposes an argument *for* them.

Fortunately, this requirement is limited in several ways.

- a) *For this purpose*, it is not necessary to study the scientific questions about the age of the earth or the descent of man.

To say this is not to say that such questions are uninteresting or unimportant. But if it can be established that Jesus of Nazareth rose from the dead on the third day after his crucifixion, then discussions about the age of the earth are, in an important sense, secondary – they are details to be settled, and Christianity will remain true however they are settled. To put the same point differently: If Jesus rose from the dead and the earth is 4.5 billion years old, Christianity is

true; whereas if the earth was created in 4004 BC but Jesus is still dead in the tomb, Christianity is false.

- b) *For this purpose*, the argument *for* the scriptures need not be an argument for their inspiration or their inerrancy.

Again, to say this is not to say that the doctrine of inspiration is unimportant. But the question before us is what an aspiring apologist needs to study first, and here (though I realize this contravenes the advice of some eminent apologists) I am persuaded that the wisest course is to study first the defense of the principal points of the faith. The substantial truthfulness and historical trustworthiness of the documents to which one is appealing is all one need contend for in order for this argument to go through. If that much can be satisfactorily defended, then our adversaries can reject the testimony of the documents only on pain of applying a double standard, treating the scriptures with a level of skepticism that they cannot and would not apply to the documents of secular history.

- c) *For the purpose of this argument*, the defense need not extend even to the entire New Testament. The critical point is to be able to defend the veracity of those portions of the documents, or those claims extracted from the documents, from which one's argument proceeds.

(1) For a "minimal facts" argument of the sort favored by Habermas and Craig, one need do very little in defense of the documents: the early creed in 1 Corinthians 15 and the admissions of most contemporary biblical scholars even of a very liberal bent will provide all of one's premises.

(2) A more robust argument that takes seriously the historical details given in the resurrection accounts in the Gospels – a line of approach that I favor myself.

Because it goes beyond minimal facts, this sort of argument requires a great deal more historical homework than the minimal facts approach requires; the payoff, however, is a much more detailed basis of evidence in support of the conclusion.

But even this line of argument for the resurrection is limited to the Gospels, Acts, and a passage or two from the undisputed epistles of St. Paul. It does not require the apologist to make a special study, say, of the Pauline authorship of the Pastoral epistles or the Petrine authorship of 2 Peter.

## Using Classic and Contemporary Sources

### 1. For Defensive General Apologetics

#### The Problem of Evil

C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (on the problem of evil)

\* William Lane Craig, *Hard Questions, Real Answers*, chapters 4 and 5 (problem of evil)

#### The Challenge of Science

C. S. Lewis, *Miracles*, chapter 3 (turning the tables on naturalism)

Arthur James Balfour, *The Foundations of Belief*

\* John Lennox, *God's Undertaker: Has Science Buried God?*

\* David Berlinski, *The Devil's Delusion*

#### The Incredibility of Miracles

William Adams, *An Essay in Answer to Mr. Hume's Essay on Miracles*, 3rd ed.

George Campbell, *A Dissertation on Miracles*

John Douglas, *The Criterion*

\* Geivett and Groothuis, eds., *In Defense of Miracles*

\* John Earman, *Hume's Abject Failure*

\* Joseph Houston, *Reported Miracles: A Critique of Hume*

### 2. For Positive General Apologetics

C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, Book I (moral argument)

C. S. Lewis, *Miracles*, chapter 3 (problems with naturalism)

Peter Kreeft, *Between Heaven and Hell*

\* Dean Overman, *A Case Against Accident and Self-Organization*

\* David H. Glass, *Atheism's New Clothes*

\* Robert Shapiro, *Origins: A Sceptic's Guide to Life on Earth*

### 3. For Defensive Biblical Apologetics

Richard Watson, *An Apology for the Bible*

William Paley, *A View of the Evidences of Christianity*, Part III

John Haley, *An Examination of the Alleged Discrepancies in the Bible*

Elizabeth Whately, *How to Answer Objections to Revealed Religion*

- \* Eddy and Boyd, *The Jesus Legend*
- \* Craig Keener, *The Historical Jesus of the Gospels*
- \* Craig Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels*
- \* Paul Copan, *When God Goes to Starbucks*
- \* William Lane Craig, *Hard Questions, Real Answers*

#### 4. For Positive Biblical Apologetics

C. S. Lewis, "Modern Theology and Biblical Criticism"  
 William Paley, *A View of the Evidences of Christianity*  
 Edmund Bennett, *The Four Gospels from a Lawyer's Standpoint*  
 John James Blunt, *Undesigned Coincidences*  
 F. F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?*

- \* Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*
- \* Richard Burridge, *What are the Gospels? A Comparison with Graeco-Roman Biography*,  
 2nd ed

#### **Where do we go from here?**

Each of these four kinds of apologetics is needed in churches and schools.

Once you have a footing in each area, explore more thoroughly whichever area grabs your interest or whichever area you find comes up most frequently in your apologetics work. It is okay to become a bit of a specialist once you are rounded out with something to say in each category.

Vision: Producing outlines for talks on each of these areas so that

1. Someone who wants to learn the material well enough to present it can study efficiently, learning exactly what he needs to know in order to do it well, and
2. Presenting at a church or in some other setting is made easier by the existence of a shared set of resources – outlines, powerpoint slides, supporting quotations, etc.

We can build this!