

Living an Apologetic Life

Posted by Ravi Zacharias on October 18, 2003

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The single greatest obstacle to the impact of the Gospel has not been its inability to provide answers, but the failure on our part to live it out."

Though this chapter addresses the pastor and church leader in some measure, its content and the entire book is aimed at all who seek to live out their faith with integrity.

Recognizing the role that living out a disciplined Christian life plays is a starting point for taking on the responsibility of the work of Christian apologetics. There are numerous tasks one can assign, but I would like to underscore four of them. Years ago, as I began my own journey in this field, it was from the pen of Os Guinness that I learned these truths. I am indebted to him for them. I now take the liberty to expand on them and consider these tasks with the pastor and church leader in mind. Nevertheless, this information could be applied by anyone attempting to handle the responsibility with commitment.

Clarify Truth Claims

The first assignment for church leaders is to clarify truth claims. This purpose is paramount because Christianity has suffered much by flirting with worldly methods and seductions. I well recall delivering a lecture at the Lenin Military Academy in Moscow some years ago. It was one of those experiences when halfway through my own talk I wondered why on earth I had accepted the invitation to speak. I was clearly an unwelcome guest in the minds of many of the officers compelled to sit in and listen. One, in particular, kept giving me the choke sign. Trying to communicate my message through an interpreter with this constant intimidation was no easy task. But as soon as I finished, I realized the almost unpardonable blunder I had made. This same officer sprung to his feet and said, "You have been using the word God for the last hour. What do you mean by that term?" My, oh my! How disconnected I had been from my audience. This was a roomful of atheists, and I had not taken the trouble to define my fundamental terms.

We may shake our heads at this unfortunate oversight, but I have come to the conclusion that it is made behind our pulpits all over the world on a regular basis. Even the term Christian in many parts of the world today is heard with immense prejudice. In the Middle East, for example, it is almost impossible for one to hear it without its historical baggage and distortion. The claims of Christ are repeatedly

made in sermons, lectures, and testimonies, yet rarely do we explain what we mean when we say some of the most basic things. Many listeners have more of a perverted view of what it means to be a Christian than they do an authentic one. Stereotypical answers no longer satisfy.

Os Guinness tells the story of a young protégé of Francis Schaeffer who was sharing his faith with a French existentialist in a Parisian barroom setting.

Unknown to the young Schaefferian, the Frenchman had read most of Schaeffer's books. With every answer the Christian gave, the atheist began to see the obvious, until finally he broke his secret and said, "Excuse me, but do you write with a Schaeffer pen, too?" That ended the discussion. Indeed, if the terms are parroted without understanding, the message is garbled and appears inauthentic.

Let me make an important parenthetical statement here. One of the most fallacious ideas ever spawned in Western attitudes toward truth is the oft-repeated pronouncement that exclusionary claims to truth are a Western way of thinking. The East, it is implied, accepts all religions as equally true. This is patently false. Every religion, without exception, has some foundational beliefs that are categorically nonnegotiable and exclude everything to the contrary. You see, truth by definition is exclusive. If truth were all-inclusive, nothing would be false. And if nothing were false, what would be the meaning of true?

Furthermore, if nothing were false, would it be true to say that everything is false? It quickly becomes evident that nonsense would follow.

Even Buddhism, which is often held up as being the example of "religious tolerance," is not exempt from dogmatism. Buddhists forget or downplay the fact that Buddha was born a Hindu and rejected some of the fundamental precepts of Hinduism. Buddha's own statement was that truth mattered more than conformity. What, therefore, takes place in popular thought is a reflection of the way culture has been engineered to deal with truth issues. This is the nerve of the problem in communication. It is the sacred duty of a pastor to remind his people periodically of the very nature of truth because if truth dies, even at the altar of cultural sensitivities, then so does the Gospel in the listener's ears. The first and foremost task of the apologist is to stand for the truth and to clarify the claims of the Gospel.

Clarifying and defending the truth is the hard part of apologetics because this is foundational. Most people today, when asked to define truth, stumble and stutter because they have never paused to understand what even they themselves mean when they say Jesus is "the way and the truth and the life."

Truth, very simply stated, boils down to two tests: Statements made must correspond to reality, and the system of thought that is developed as a result must be coherent. The correspondence and coherence tests are applied by all of us in matters that affect us.¹

When Jesus said, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No man comes to the Father except through me" ([John 14:6](#)), he was making a very reasonable

statement by affirming truth's exclusivity. The question one may legitimately ask is whether he demonstrated that claim rather than just stating it without any reasonable defense. Hence it is very important when making truth claims before an audience to clarify them. This task is the first and most important step in apologetics.

In one's own preaching, a pastor should be able to defuse most questions. We can illustrate this process by using terminology from the field of electronics. The pastor or leader who stands in the pulpit takes the two prongs of the heart and intellect within the seeker and plugs them into the structure of his or her message, connecting them to the receptacle of God's power that energizes the soul of the recipient. When this happens, the pastor has served as an "adapter" for the need, and apologetics has met its demand. This is the least someone's preaching should do. In answering the questions, the pastor becomes the bearer of God's response.

If the subject is too vast for the pastor or leader to tackle, he or she must find resources or contacts that can help people wade through their questions. Pastors do not have to have expertise in every area, but they must be equipped to point people to resources that will provide answers for their questions. Never before has so much written and videotaped material been available for helping people tackle the hard questions (see the appendix at the end of this book). Well-known exponents deal with issues that young minds grapple with, and in being aware of this material, church leaders demonstrate a cognizance of the issues.

Bear the Responsibility To Remove Obstacles

Second, leaders have a responsibility to remove obstacles in the path of listeners so that they can get a direct look at the cross and the person of Christ. This task of apologetics can be equated to what Os Guinness descriptively calls "bush clearing." Here sensitivity to the experience and reasoning of the individual becomes key.

I remember a time in the early years of my ministry when a young couple asked if they could spend a few minutes with me. We sat down and began to talk, and their first question was about the existence of pain and suffering in this world. How could God be a loving God? As I was in the process of answering, I caught a glimpse of their baby sleeping in the pew behind them. I instantly noticed that the little one had been born with some very sad deformities. I then realized that the last thing they needed was an intellectually distant answer to their felt hurt. There were obstacles to their belief in God that could not be set aside by an academic wave of the wand. To enable them to take a look at Jesus Christ without that barrier was the long, arduous task of response.

Every proclamation necessitates anticipating barriers. And it is only when these barriers are removed by the message and the Holy Spirit brings conviction that the heart can cleave to the cross. Over the years I have witnessed repeatedly

what the mature Christian already knows, namely, that ultimately the problems are not intellectual but moral. This knowledge, however, still necessitates a process by which the critic can be made aware of its truth.

Some years ago I was at one of the leading universities of the world. On the second night of the open forums, a student stood up and said to me, "Last night I brought two of the most vocal atheists on the campus to hear your challenge to atheism. They had come ready to attack your lecture, but at the end when you opened it up for questions, they remained silent. So on our way back to the dorm, I asked them why they did not say anything during the time of questions. One of them said that your arguments were pretty tough to counter and held together quite well. I was surprised at their concession. There was silence, and then he added this: 'But we will still remain atheists.' What do you have to say to that?" The student's question was quite simple to answer. I said, "If you remember my opening statement last night, you will see the point established. I began my lecture by saying that my task was to try to establish that, for most atheists, their atheism is based on a moral problem rather than an intellectual one. They wanted moral autonomy and hence presented their opposition to theism as an intellectual one rather than the other way around. I should therefore consider the point proven." There was silence and then applause from those present. I really did not want the applause, but even a basically divided audience recognized where the problem lay. The task of the apologist is with God's help to help the questioner see his or her own heart as the root of the problem and pray that the Holy Spirit will bring conviction of sin, for that is what it really is. Once this conviction comes and the heart is seen for what it is, the cross stands in its magnificence as the offer of forgiveness.

Give Specific Answers by Considering the Questioner's Worldview

The third task for church leaders is to give specific answers—and this is essential—by considering the questioner's worldview. Here the challenge becomes a little more complex. How does one respond to legitimate fundamental questions and do so with integrity and sensitivity of heart and mind? For example, a teenager may say to her father at the dinner table one evening, "Dad, my social studies teacher told us today that sexuality is basically just a cultural thing and that each culture has established its own terms of right and wrong. Is that true?" What if the father were to say to her, "No, the Bible says there are clear laws that God has put in place for what he intended sex to be." She may well hesitate and respond, "But my teacher does not believe the Bible."

The father is right in dealing with the problem for himself, but he puts his daughter in the untenable position of positing a conclusion without defending her source of authority. If the teacher were to name the Bible as the authority, then the issue would be simpler. But if the Bible is denied this place, the father has sent his daughter into the lions' den with nothing to defend her. Therefore, I am

convinced that the most effective defense of the faith and offense against falsehood must be based on an examination of worldviews and the challenge based on this examination. Over the years of thinking through this issue, I have formed a track of approach with which many have been able to identify, especially as far as preaching is concerned. I call it “The Three Levels of Philosophy.”

We must begin by knowing how the mind works and, more to the point, how we must move from thought to action. This demands rigorous practical insight, particularly into the very process by which people come to believe certain things. Some pastors and church leaders may not be given to philosophical thinking, but each of us wrestles with these issues at some level, as surely does our audience.

The Three Levels of Philosophy

A brief philosophical explanation here will help. Philosophy, as I see it in our present context, comes to us at three levels. The first level is the foundation, the theoretical substructure of logic upon which inductions are made and deductions are postulated. Put plainly, it depends heavily on the form and the force of an argument. Logic, to most minds, has never overflowed with romance and has seldom triggered excitement. Yet truth has a direct bearing on reality, and the laws of logic apply in every sphere of our lives.

Since the laws of logic apply to reality, it is imperative that these laws be understood if any argument is to stand its ground. This can become a vast subject in itself, but for most purposes, the foundational laws are indispensable to the communication of truth. Peter Kreeft, professor of philosophy at Boston College, has briefly addressed the importance of correct argumentation in his book *Three Philosophies of Life*. In a subsection titled “Rules for Talking Back,” he writes the following:

Three things must go right with any argument: 1. The terms must be unambiguous. 2. The premises must be true. 3. The argument must be logical. 2 In any argument, the application of these rules cannot be compromised if the conclusion is to be defended or refuted. Truth is indispensable to each statement, and validity is indispensable to each deduction. This dual combination is central to the persuasiveness of any argument, and if there is a flaw in either of the two, the argument fails.

This is level one in our philosophical approach, the theoretical realm in which the laws of logic are applied to reality. To deny their application is futile and self-defeating because one must use reason to either sustain or challenge an argument. In short, level one deals with why one believes what he or she believes and is sustained by the process of reasoning, incorporating truth and logic.

For example, I well recall an exchange I once had on the campus of the University of the Philippines in Manila. A student from the audience shouted out that everything in life was meaningless. I responded by saying, “You do not

believe that.” He promptly retorted, “Yes, I do,” to which I automatically countered, “No, you don’t.” Exasperated, he said, “I most certainly do; who are you to tell me I don’t?”

“Then please repeat your statement for me,” I requested. “Everything in life is meaningless,” he stated again without qualification. I said to him, “Please remain standing; this will only take a moment. I assume that you assume that your statement is meaningful. If your statement is meaningful, then everything is not meaningless. On the other hand, if everything is meaningless, then what you have just said is meaningless as well. So in effect you have said nothing.”

The young man was startled for a moment, and even as I left the auditorium, he was pacing the floor and muttering, “If everything is meaningless, then …” And so it went!

The second level of philosophy does not feel the constraint of reason or come under the binding structures of argument. It finds its refuge in the imagination and feeling. Ways of thinking at this level may enter one’s consciousness via a play or a novel, or touch the imagination through visual media, making belief-altering impact by capturing the emotions. It is immensely effective, and literature, drama, and music have historically molded the soul of a nation far more than solid reasoning has. Level two is existential and fallaciously claims that it need not bow to the laws of logic.

However, many individuals who take their emotions as a starting point for determining truth, in grabbing the finger of feeling, think they have grabbed the fist of truth. By thinking exclusively at this level, they are driven systematically further inward, until their whole world revolves around their personal passion, with a dangerous self-absorption. They reshape their worldview to a “better felt than tell’t” perspective—if it feels good, do it, or, as the line from the song says, “How can it be wrong when it feels so right?” Unfortunately, even many churches have given in to thinking almost exclusively at this level, as evidenced in their worship and preaching. But we shortchange our audience when we divorce our preaching from serious engagement with difficult ideas and instead preach at the level of emotion.

The third level of philosophy is what I call “kitchen-table conclusions.” It is amazing how much of the moralizing and prescribing in life goes on during casual conversations. The setting can vary from sidewalk cafés, where frustrated philosophers pontificate on profound themes, to the kitchen table, where children interact with their parents on questions that deal with far-reaching issues. The question may arise out of the latest nagging news item or scandal of the day, or it could be a question raised in the classroom, such as the one posed by the daughter to her father. This level of philosophizing escapes neither the child nor the academic dean of a prestigious school because “Why?” is one of the earliest expressions of human life.

In summary, level one concerns logic, level two is based on feeling, and level three is where all is applied to reality. To put it another way, level one states why

we believe what we believe, level two indicates why we live the way we live, and level three states why we legislate for others the way we do. For every life that is lived at a reasonable level, these three questions must be answered. First, can I defend what I believe in keeping with the laws of logic? That is, is it tenable? Second, if everyone gave himself or herself the prerogatives of my philosophy, could there be harmony in existence? That is, is it livable? Third, do I have a right to make moral judgments in the matters of daily living? That is, is it transferable? None of these levels can exist in isolation. They must follow a proper sequence. Here is the key: One must argue from level one, illustrate from level two, and apply at level three. Life must move from truth to experience to prescription. If either the theist or the atheist violates this procedure, he or she is not dealing with reality but is creating one of his or her own.

Remember the dinner-table discussion between the father and his daughter regarding sexuality and culture? Notice that the father makes his argument at the third level—prescription—while the question comes at another level, namely, Are there absolutes? Therefore, the father must instead establish at level one the reason for, or reasonableness of, his claim. He must show that an absolute by nature is not culturally determined. I realize that this is not easily done for people of any age, but it must be done when the mind is capable of engaging the argument.

On one occasion I ran up against this very question from a news reporter. I had just finished lecturing at a university, and she had very graciously stayed through the entire lecture even though she had other pressing engagements. After the lecture was over, she was walking beside me and said, “Can I ask you a question that really troubles me about the Christian?”

I was glad to oblige. “Why,” she asked, “are Christians openly against racial discrimination but at the same time discriminate against certain types of sexual behavior?” (She made more specific references to the types of behavior she felt we discriminated against.)

I said this to her: “We are against racial discrimination because one’s ethnicity is sacred. You cannot violate the sacredness of one’s race. For the same reason we are against the altering of God’s pattern and purpose for sexuality. Sex is sacred in the eyes of God and ought not to be violated. What you have to explain is why you treat race as sacred and desacralize sexuality. The question is really yours, not mine. In other words, our reasoning in both cases stems from the same foundational basis. You in effect switch the basis of reasoning, and that is why you are living in contradiction.”

There was silence, and she said, “I’ve never thought of it in those terms.” You see, when an argument is taken to the first level, it immediately finds a common point of reference. When it leaps only to the third level, it builds without a foundation....

Bring a Balance Between the Heart and Mind

The church leader's fourth task is to bring a balance between heart and mind. The danger of getting bogged down on the technical side of debating truth is that one could lose contact with felt needs, and hence the connection must be established. Relevance comes in precisely at the point of application. If, for example, all of the claims of Jesus are backed only by the historical, empirical attestations, someone who struggles only on the existential level will not be able to make the connection. The reason Jesus brings meaning is because of who He is.

People in every generation have lived with various privatized struggles, but today's generations face some distinctive ones. The assault on the imagination by way of the visual has brought with it new horizons but disappointing fantasies as well. Beauty and art have diminishing returns without a worldview to interpret them and fill the gaps. After some time, merely aesthetic or entertaining experiences wane in exhilaration and the mind seeks more. This is the built-in price of pleasure. While the entertainment world may have left one entertained, ever pining for more, the world of knowledge has left old ways of intellectual pursuit on uncertain terrain....

The pastor is often the only person who can help people make sense of it all. What a privilege this is! But for a pastor and other church leaders, helping the congregation to connect their fragmented lives and to see the evidence of God's providence involves both the heart and the mind. Even as questions storm the Christian faith and uneasiness attends the role of apologetics, ministry has sought to find other ways of "meeting needs." Yet such ministry will pay its dues if apologetics is neglected. This is precisely what may have brought about a highly charged emotionalism in contemporary Christian expression, with the mind having been buried in the process. Emotions are a vital part of our being and must be engaged, but emotionalism is the perversion of emotion, jettisoning reason. As a result, for the average Christian, going to church is just something he or she does in addition to everything else. It is a parenthetical injection into the bloodstream of living, only because the spirit remains undernourished in the harried expressions of daily routine....

I well remember a graduate student at Cornell University, at the end of a lecture I gave in defense of the Christian faith, saying this to me: "Every waking moment I am compelled to live within a naturalist framework. How in the name of reason can I make a paradigm shift to the supernatural?" Going to church to have her questions answered was the farthest thing from her mind. She was living a compartmentalized life, yearning for the spirit to be touched, but not thinking that the ministry of the church could provide it. Jesus spoke to the outcasts of society, but fascinatingly, in his selection of two of his most effective spokespersons, Moses and Paul, He picked ones with sharp minds but deep passions. This

combination, I believe, must shape our communication so that life is seen as a whole and not as in fragments. In a day when so much goes wrong in many places around the world and so much is spurious, there must be a place where there are answers and where there is integrity in the message. It is the place where God's people are gathered and are shepherded by one who knows how to cross the span from struggle to hope.

With Gentleness and Respect

Sadly, pastoring is a vanishing vision in our culture. The pastor who comes near has become an endangered species. Amid growth and high-tech ways of communicating, some pastors have become reclusive and distant. For the sake of our culture, I long to see the return of their presence. We must listen to our congregations—and often the question behind their questions. When met with gentleness and respect, many people admit their vulnerability.

We are called to be faithful in living out and preaching the Word. And God has promised to honor those who honor him. If our preaching leads people to genuine repentance and worship, we will help meet the deepest longings of the heart and mind, and they will find where true discovery lies.

1 An important fine-tuning of this has been done by Norman Geisler in his book [Christian Apologetics](#) (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998). See his chapter 8, "Formulating Adequate Tests for Truth."

2 Peter Kreeft, [Three Philosophies of Life](#) (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989), 54.