

What is the Relationship between Apologetics and Evangelism?

By Bob Young

One of the great challenges that face Christians in today's world is how to share the gospel. A part of the challenge comes as a result of the increasing unbelief in the world. That means that evangelism must often be preceded by apologetics. How does one begin a Bible study when the person one is studying with is not sure the Bible is dependable? Or is not sure the Bible has authority, or is the word of God? This cultural and societal context means that one must begin with a search for truth. The ultimate goal is to develop followers of Jesus, but the process often begins with a focus on learning and following truth. Then one can show that following truth is the way to follow Jesus.

When one understands this fundamental fact about where most of the people in our society live their life, one begins to seek new ways to present the truth of God. One reason I often use a series of lessons entitled "Quest for Truth" (Spanish, "En Pos de la Verdad") is that the lessons combine apologetics and evangelism.

What is apologetics?

The Great Commission gives to every disciple of Christ the responsibility of sharing the Good News. The Great Commission was given to the apostles, but it is clear from the book of Acts that the members of the early church took the commission personally, as they went everywhere preaching the word while the apostles remained in Jerusalem (Acts 8:1-4). Christians today are part of a long chain of believers; the baton is in our hands.

That is exciting news, but it is also overwhelming. To take the gospel to the entire world seems a big demand and a big job. Consider how important it is that every Christian accept the responsibility and participate in the work.

Think about a good evangelist, perhaps the best in the world. Let us assume that the preaching of the evangelist can bring 1000 persons to Jesus per day, 1/3 million per year, 1 million every three years. That means it would take 3000 years to convert a billion (1000 million). It would take nearly 30000 years to convert the world with the efforts of this one evangelist. A normal response is, let's use more evangelists. The numbers improve with more evangelists. One hundred evangelists only need 300 years!

Now consider the idea that every Christian is called to disciple-making. If we begin with 1,000,000 Christians (a conservative number, but this is only an illustration and we have to start somewhere). Each Christian makes one disciple-making disciple each year. The exponential power of this approach doubles, then quadruples, then octuples, etc. In 10 years, there are 1000 times as many Christians. (The actual sequence is 2-4-8-16-32-64-128-256-512-1024; I have rounded to 1000 to make the calculations easier). In 10 years, 1 million Christians become 1 billion Christians. It is probably safe to say that the entire population of the world would have heard in 10 years; certainly in the following year, the gospel will have permeated the world.

Consider the difference: using disciple making requires 10 years, using multiple great evangelists requires 300 years. Not only is it faster to use disciple making as an evangelistic tool to reach the world, it is God's plan.

The good news is that God puts the tools we need in our hand in order to obey his commands. He has given us the gospel. He promises his presence. He has given us the ability to present a reasoned case for the gospel. This is apologetics. It is a part of the process that will bring the world to Jesus.

Apologetics means a defense, a reasoned case, for the innocence of an accused, or the validity of an

argument or belief. Apologetics is an important part of the Christian faith in today's world. Apologetics helps us proclaim and communicate the gospel. How?

First, apologetics is how we identify and overcome barriers to faith. Does the lack of faith come from misunderstandings or misrepresentations? Is there a genuine difficulty over the truth claims of the Christian faith? The task of correcting and addressing such barriers is usually reactive. A concern arises and we respond. When honest questions are asked, honest answers must be graciously given. Why does God allow suffering? How can I understand the Trinity?

Second, the apologist seeks to show the truth and relevance of the gospel. Not only must we show that the Christian faith is rationally compelling, we must help people realize that the Christian faith is so wonderful and exciting that nothing compares with it. We show it is true, and we show that it will work.

Third, the ideas of the Christian faith are unfamiliar to many and must be explained in familiar words, terms, and images. This is also the role of apologetics.

Apologetics can be quite complex, but these three basic themes from apologetics can enhance our evangelistic message: (1) responding to objections to overcome faith barriers, (2) communicating the excitement and wonder of transformative faith, and (3) bringing the core ideas of the Christian faith into understandable language.

The Difference between Apologetics and Evangelism

Based on this brief introduction, I hope it is clear that Christian apologetics helps to explain themes such as suffering and the reasonableness of faith. Evangelism takes the next step and seeks response. Apologetics lays the foundation, evangelism invites. Apologetics seeks consent, evangelism seeks commitment. Apologetics is conversational, evangelism is invitational. Apologetics clears the ground so that the invitation is more likely to be accepted.

- Apologetics is not evangelism. To think otherwise is a grave mistake. Too many evangelistic efforts have sought only to prove truth. Apologetics equips one to answer life questions. Apologetics seeks to give answers to difficult questions.
- Evangelism is not proving truth. Evangelism is sharing application of that truth, good news that can change lives. Faith is about commitment not just belief.
- Apologetics and evangelism are essential and interconnected partners in Christian outreach.

The Value of Bible Study Tools that Combine Apologetics and Evangelism

Someone responds: if all that you have said is true, I can never become a disciple-maker because I cannot answer all of the difficult questions. Thankfully, as I mentioned at the beginning, there are Bible study tools available that combine apologetics and evangelism. Such Bible studies seek to establish valid methods for study (including Bible study), and work through some of the more common difficulties like the Trinity, suffering, and earning salvation. Such studies identify and respond to faith questions and barriers, show the transforming power of faith to change lives, and make the basic ideas of Christian salvation understandable.

The studies I mentioned at the beginning have the additional advantage that they are inductive studies that use effective Bible study techniques to encourage self-discovery by the student. The role of the "teacher" is simply to guide the study and serve as a resource person to help direct the student to more Bible study helps.

Combining apologetics and evangelism is not easy and requires additional study of additional topics, and more time. Some people see eight lessons and think that must be too many. It is true that the gospel message can be shared in fewer than eight lessons. The truth is that the gospel can be shared in one, two or three lessons at the most, IF a person has no faith questions that can only be answered by apologetics, IF a person has no faith barriers or doubts, IF a person sees the Bible message as always consistent, valid, reasonable, and relevant, and IF a person understands the Bible message and is not confused by Bible words. IF all of the above are true, establishing the foundations may not be necessary.

My experience is that it is almost always a good idea to establish the foundations. Most Christians could benefit from restudying the foundations as a prelude to a new, fresh study of the biblical text. To begin with the foundation avoids problems, conflicts, and arguments later on. The foundations establish a solid footing for the study and establish good Bible study techniques.

On the other hand, obviously one could expand the eight lessons almost interminably and address numerous faith questions. This question of how to balance apologetics and evangelism is an important one. The apologetic dimension of initial Bible studies (which people are being introduced to the study of the Bible for the first time) should anticipate the most common problems—for example, the nature of God, who is Jesus, the difference between the Old Testament and the New Testament (Bible consistency), why some Christians do not live changed lives, and why God does not always protect Christians from bad things. The experienced “teacher” will listen carefully, hear and identify other potential difficulties, and help find the necessary resources to address other faith barriers. The evangelism dimension should present the gospel—the authority of Jesus and his words, his call to repentance and faithfulness, his promise of forgiveness to those who obey his word and keep his commands, and the nature of the community of believers described in the New Testament.

To some extent apologetics is done culturally. As a translation from the English “Quest for Truth,” the Spanish series “En Pos de la Verdad” does not attempt to address every cultural concern, but it uses the Bible text to bring to light possible obstacles to faith. Apologetics does not convert anyone. Apologetics points people in the right direction by removing barriers to an encounter with God, or by opening a door through which Jesus can be seen. Apologetics can help people understand the significance of the gospel. The interaction between the “teacher” and the student will occur in the cultural context common to both.

Apologetics can be compared to the response of Philip to Nathanael, “Come and see.” The inductive Bible study invites people to come and see for themselves. This is not argument; this is a person given the opportunity to encounter the message of Jesus, and to thereby encounter Jesus who is the hope for fulfilling our deepest human yearnings.

Faith is not about merely changing minds. Faith is about personal transformation through an encounter with God. We cannot heal others. We can only point people to the source of healing and forgiveness, modeling it in our own lives. Apologetics does not make Christian faith relevant; it helps people learn the relevance of faith. When people understand the relevance of faith, they are more likely to want to know how the Bible describes that faith and the faithful response of followers of Jesus.