

THE GOSPEL WITH APOLOGY



Manik Corea, NAMS Network

Go tell the world - and use words

I used to love Monday mornings. Until he and his family recently moved out, I got to have coffee and talk for an hour with one of my neighbors, an American Baha'i, a dyed-in-the-wool leader of his faith community.

Over the months, we've had cordial but passionate discussions about each other's faith claims. As I shared the uniqueness of the gospel of Jesus Christ, I pray (and continue to do so) that God would steadily remove obstacles and barriers in his path, and plant seeds of faith into his heart. We still plan to meet up from time to time, so my wife and I hope to continue to witness to them as a family.

My experience of seeking to reach and share with my neighbor taught me many things. Chief among them was that evangelism and telling the Gospel, as part of the process of disciple-making, may take time. It is a process, not simply one-off events, though there can be occasions when a one time telling of the Gospel is all it takes to bring someone to faith in Jesus.

In my case, much time was spent in prayer and research as I've sort to understand my neighbor's world-view and present a clearly different stance. Out of all this, a genuine love and desire has grown that he would be brought face to face with the Risen Christ. The love of Christ compels me to keep sharing my faith (see 2 Corinthians 5:14).

But I have not always been so keen. As a shy young Christian, I would have struggled to articulate a reasonable defense for my faith, let alone attempt to share the Gospel or converse with someone who believed otherwise. Sadly, I was not unusual.

I know far too many Christians who believe in Jesus but can't (or won't) tell others. They are often silenced by fear and shame at offending or appearing foolish before non-believers. Some claim they don't know enough to share their faith or explain and answer questions. Many Christians conveniently or compunctiously ignore Jesus' command to take him and make him known to all nations and people.

We hide Jesus at in the back-rooms of our lives and only parrot His name in the safe company of Christians. Faith is a private matter kept out of public lives. We cower before the all-pervasive dominance of the secular and relativistic ideologies of our time.

In a pluralistic world such as ours, there is admittedly a delicate balance and sensitivity needed to know when and how we show and share our faith in the public sphere.

But Jesus never told us to occupy the moral high ground and cast religious stones at others or be insensitive peddlers of piety either. Indeed he modeled a more gentler conversational approach to planting seeds of the Gospel, born out of genuine concern, uncompromising truth and compelling love. Take a look at his stellar approach to the woman at the well in John 4:4-42 or his loving prophetic challenge to the rich young ruler of Mark 10:21.

We are to show forth our faith by our good deeds (Matthew 5:16), and make him known by our good words (Romans 10:14, Luke 12:8), paying particular attention to those who respond and their communal networks (the person of peace in Luke 10:6).

The Gospel is for all, and it must be told. Good news that is secret is neither news nor good.

Apologetics without apology

The Gospel must be communicated to take effect. But not only must we share it, we must further be prepared to defend it. The epistula writings bear this out - we are to be ready with answers and work to remove barriers to Jesus (2 Corinthians 10:5, 2 Timothy 4:2, 1 Peter 3:15, Jude 3). We are to deal with grace towards non-believers (Colossians 4:5,6). While evangelism is the proclamation of the good news of Jesus, apologetics prepares the ground and shores up our message. Both are necessary.

The Greek word 'apologia' literally means a defense against a charge or accusation. In Philippians 1:16, Paul uses it of his defense of Gospel preaching against his detractors. In 1 Peter 3:15, Peter speaks of being ready to give a defense - an apology, for the faith against anyone (even hostile non-believers) who asks for a reason for our hope. We are to answer with gentleness and respect - strong-arm tactics and vociferous argumentation are out of question. Peter makes the point that we must first 'set apart Christ as Lord' in our hearts. The soundness and persuasiveness of our defense is dependent on the integrity and authenticity of our faith.

The best apologetic of our faith is ultimately not a well presented set of sound propositions but a life lived out in obedience, humility and grace, to the glory of our God. Evangelist Gipsy Smith said 'There are five Gospels - Matthew, Mark, Luke, John and the Christian, and most people will never read the first four!'

Jesus called us salt and light to the world - and that involves standing in contradiction to the world and having a noticeable effect on those around us. The Church was always meant to be a lighthouse in the dark, treacherous waters of the world, but Christians sometimes want their church to be merely a clubhouse for the converted. We hide and cower in our holy huddles from the task that God has set and sent us for.

Indeed, when was the last time you were mobilized to reach your community in some tangible, intentional way? When did you last hear a sermon that helped you to learn how to love and reach your skeptical, non-believing neighbors or Muslim immigrants? Or showed from Scripture that evangelical witness was the job of the whole church, not just 'the professionals'?

Surely the blame for the tepid state of Christian witness today must be laid at the feet of her shepherds and leaders, called to obey, model, teach and transmit that faith once delivered.

In a world of competing and contradictory beliefs, values and expectations, Christians must know how to present and defend their faith in a way that is cogent, rational and relevant to the world at large. We are all apologists of the Gospel - the question is whether we will be good ones or bad ones.

Telling us as we are

In our post-modern world where truth has become a matter of personal choice, morality sinks to the level of popular consensus. There is concomitantly no ultimate purpose to life; no supra-cultural meta-narrative or story to hold it all together. This is a grave challenge to the Christian Gospel. Writer Gene Veith comments, 'It is hard to proclaim the forgiveness of sins to people who believe that, since morality is relative, they have no sins to forgive.'¹ Man, wrapped up in himself, is become the measure of all things.

Listen to a popular dictum: 'At twenty years of age, we wonder what others are thinking of us. At forty, we stop caring what others think. At sixty, we realize they weren't thinking of us at all.'

It betrays something of the narcissistic mood of our time, an oblique self-serving view of life inherited by birth. In time, mature and untreated, we all become full-fledged sinners, broken and bent out of shape, or, as Martin Luther wrote, 'curved in on ourselves!'²

But the problem is compounded today by the deconstruction and denial of traditional morality. Increasingly, we think too much and too highly of ourselves. We gyrate to the discordant beats and haunting melodies of sins we no longer feel ashamed about. We set up choice idols to serve us, we fiddle technologies to distraction. We imperiously treat our lives as playgrounds where we while away our brief moments in blissful ignorance of our mortality and ultimate accountability to God.

In such a world, the primary tasks of the disciple-maker is to hold up a mirror to the modern person, so all can see themselves as they truly are - sinners in desperate need of saving.

In this, we are not alone, because it is the Holy Spirit who emboldens our witness, gives us the words to say before hostile people and ultimately brings about the conviction and conversion of hearts (Acts 1:8, Luke 12:11-12, John 16:8). But we must do our part.

In the next blog chapter, I will look at three skills we must apply in order to effectively share our faith as we seek to make disciples of the nations.

How to share your faith relevantly

Along with fervent prayer, there are three essential skills every obedient Christian who attempts to share and defend his faith would do well to master.

Firstly, the readiness to listen well to the questions, challenges and viewpoints of those we reach. We must pay attention to issues of the heart, patiently mining out of often frantic lives, the deep seated longings and questions that only Jesus can answer.

We do this only by giving quality time to non-Christians, engaging them in genuine listening and non-judgmental conversation. Care before you share.

Secondly, we not only need to listen, but respond in a way that brings clarity and clears up confusion. Asking the right questions can bring instant clarity.

'How do I know I even exist?' asked the philosopher student, confused by the sheer weight of his solipsistic ponderings. His professors looked him up and answered: 'And whom shall I say is asking?' The fallacy unmasked in one fell swoop.

Questioning the underlying assumptions and pre-suppositions behinds people's belief and ideas is one of the main skills of effective apologetics. We see Jesus doing this often in His responses - whether uncovering the hidden motives of his critics (Matthew 21:25; 22:17-20), the human-centered standard for goodness employed by the religious (Luke 10:26; 18:19) or underlying issues of unbelief (Mark 9:23). When we question the questioner, we do so gently to uncover how contradictory and self-refuting many people's objections are. For example, if someone says that 'all truth is relative', we can gently counter, 'is that absolutely true?'

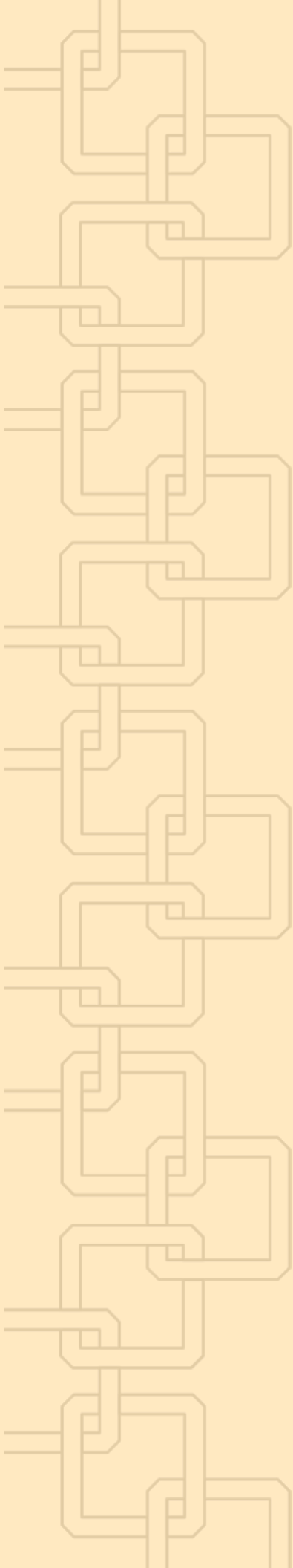
Philosophical and existential questions on meaning, truth and life demand clear thinking in response. We must gently expose flawed pre-suppositions and faulty logic, in order to get to the root of the problem.

Don't be afraid to ask 'why' or 'how' someone has come to the conclusion behind their question. For example, if we are challenged thus: 'how can you believe in a good all-powerful God when there is so much suffering in the world?' we could gently question the assumption or pre-supposition that there must be a reason and explanation behind human suffering, or else (as in a naturalistic world view), the question would not make sense. In other words, the question actually demands a standard of morality (what kind of world this ought to be) which in itself requires a moral law-giver.

Thirdly, we need to seek to share and explain the Gospel clearly.

Christians should know their world-view inside out and live accordingly. We have a comprehensive and coherent worldview that presents clear and concise answers to what philosophers call first-order questions - 'Who is God and can we know him?'; 'What is the meaning and purpose of life?' and 'Why does God permit evil today?' We must show clearly the universality of the fall of man and human sinfulness before we can speak of God's historic rescue plan in the death and resurrection of Christ, with the eternal consequences our responses carry.

The Good News of Jesus is eternally so. Because God's answer in Jesus Christ is wholly true and always relevant to every culture, place and time, the Church has a grave, noble and urgent task at hand, to seek to make that Gospel heard and understood in all nations, and defended, as we need to. We can ill-afford to remain silent: 'Good news is only good news if it gets there in time.' (Carl F.H. Henry).



1. Veith, Gene Edward. *Postmodern Times: A Christian Guide to Contemporary Thought and Culture*. Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1994. Page 16.
2. Luther, Martin. *Luther's Works*, Vol 25. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1956. Page 345.