

Apologetics vs. Evangelism

By William H. Gross

There is a difference between proclaiming the Gospel and engaging in apologetics. The first is directed toward non-believing elect to bring them to a saving faith in Jesus Christ. The second is directed toward non-believers, whether elect or not,¹ to refute falsehoods concerning the Church, Christ, or the truth of God. The word “Gospel” normally refers only to that portion of God’s truth concerning salvation. That’s what we proclaim when we evangelize. However, it may also refer to the entire body of truth contained in the Bible. In this second sense, the Gospel encompasses the historic orthodoxy of the Church and the distinctives of the Christian Faith. We don’t use the whole body of Christian truth when we evangelize. It isn’t necessary. Yet the whole of it comes into play when we defend the faith against heresies from within (called *polemics*) and false accusations from without (called *apologetics*).

When we evangelize, we are concerned only with the *kerygma*, that proclamation of the Gospel which concerns salvation. This subset of the entire Gospel truth is the tip of the sword. It is Paul proclaiming, “if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.” (Rom 10:9) It is the response given to the jailer who asks what he must do to be saved: “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved – you and your household.” (Acts 16:31) The content of the proclamation is what we call the *evangelion*, or sometimes we call it the *milk of salvation*:

1Cor 15:3-4 “For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures...”

Heb 6:1-2 Therefore let us leave the elementary teachings about Christ and go on to maturity, not laying again the foundation of repentance from acts that lead to death, and of faith in God, instruction about baptisms, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment.

The Gospel call is much like the ram’s horn sounded in the Old Testament on the Sabbath. It calls out the people of God to assemble before him. It is directed to the people of God, and it is effectual to gather them. Jn 10:27 “My sheep listen to my voice; I know them and they follow me.” We simply proclaim the good news; that is, we scatter the seed of the Gospel of salvation.² Those people who belong to God and have been prepared by his Spirit will respond to it irresistibly. It takes root within them and produces fruit, which identifies them as Christ’s own. Because we don’t know which people are elect, and because the Gospel convicts as well as converts, we proclaim the Gospel to all the nations – every man, woman, and child on the planet (Mk 16:15).

¹ When we refute error that arises within the Church among believing elect, we are not engaged in apologetics but *polemics*.

² Mat 13:1-23 – Parable of the Sower; we are not concerned with the condition of the soil when we scatter seed. That’s the work of the Holy Spirit. We are concerned only with spreading the seed before us in our walk through the field. When the seed takes root, the concern changes to watering, feeding, and staking the young shoot so that it grows strong and straight. That’s the work of the *Church* (1Cor 3:6-9). It is done by the power of God working in and through us all – one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it. Eph 4:5-7 NIV

Like Andrew, the elect will follow after Christ. And like the jailer, they will ask, “What must I do to be saved?” At that point we answer their questions and provide a fuller explanation of the path of salvation. If necessary, we distinguish the truth of God from the lies of the Devil that keep them from acknowledging Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. We ask in any number of ways, “Do you truly believe that Jesus is the Son of God, who died for your sins and rose again, so that you would be accounted righteous in the sight of God by grace alone?” If they answer no, then we ask them what it is that keeps them from believing it. This begins an interactive dialogue with them to remove obstacles to their understanding. We provide reasoned answers to questions concerning who Christ is and what he accomplished on the cross. Again, the intent is to bring them to a saving faith in Jesus Christ.

We do not go into doctrinal distinctives, theological minutiae, discussions about the end-times, the nature of election, rabbit trails about the Crusades, Inquisitions, cults, politics, school prayer, or anything else that does not address who Jesus is or what he accomplished on the cross. They are distractions thrown at us by the person being called because he hopes to avoid answering the harder question, which is: “Who do *you* say Jesus is?” And yet, if he does not believe that Jesus is a historical figure, what good does it do to ask if he believes Jesus is the promised Messiah? What good does it do to say, “The Bible says...” if he doesn’t believe the Bible is reliable, or that it contains the words of the Living God? Therefore, we are obliged to answer some of these kinds of tangential questions if we are to obtain a response to the central question. We control the content and the scope of the conversation, always bringing it back to the central question.

This is not at all what happens when we are involved in apologetics. There we are re-active, not pro-active. A false accusation has been made against the Church, against Christ, or against the truth of God. The lie may be wide-ranging in scope, or esoteric in its focus. It may involve the nature of truth itself. It may deny the existence of God or attack his character (God is not good or God is not sovereign). The accuser may allege that the Bible is true only to those who believe it, but that it is not and cannot be objectively true. Moreover, they may allege that the Bible has inconsistencies and errors. This is an attack on the truth of God, the revelation of his word, and the source of salvation for mankind. It must not be permitted to stand. And so we engage in a defense of the faith against such unwarranted attacks.

Notice that these particular attacks are not directly concerned with the nature and means of salvation. That indicates they are not asked with salvation in mind. You see, we’re scrutinizing the questions or assertions to discern whether they are sincere and whether this person hopes to find an answer. If they are stated angrily or cynically, they are probably not being asked by someone looking to be saved. They are not obstacles to his understanding. They are part of an open and sometimes vicious attack on Christianity. They are argued more than asked. The intent is to justify the person’s denial of God’s existence. The intent is to excuse his rejection of God’s sovereignty and grace. The intent is to escape personal liability or culpability. We are listening to Adam in the Garden, blaming God and blaming Eve for his rebellion. If we allow the attack to go unchallenged and unanswered, it affirms the lie. We become complicit by our silence. Such attacks are waged to diminish the glory of God.³ They offer excuses to ignore or justify sin. They reject and oppose the necessary grace of God contained in the Gospel.

³ Of course, they can never actually diminish God’s glory – it is an eternal reality that exists apart from our perception of it.

If we see obvious animosity toward the Christian faith, our initial intent is not to bring this person to Christ. Our intent is not to get him to answer the central question of who Christ is, though we may certainly ask it later. Our initial intent is to refute the errors contained in the attack. It may turn out that our exchange is part of this person's journey home. It was for me. But right now he is not asking how to be saved; he is not desperately seeking God; and he is not disquieted in his soul. Right now, he is self-satisfied in his opposition to God. He mocks him, and God will not be mocked. He is on a path to destruction and cannot hear our pleas to turn away from the cliff's edge. All we can do is speak the truth to him, just as a watchman might urgently warn those who are headed to their doom. Yet the urgency at this point is not so much to have him turn, but to recognize the danger – to look up and see the great void between his own understanding and reality. Until he is convicted by the Spirit of the truth of what we say, he has neither inclination nor desire to hear the Gospel and turn.

We must not confuse the methods or purposes of apologetics with those of evangelism.

To repeat, apologetics are re-actively directed toward non-believers who make false accusations against the Church, against Christ, or against the truth of God. In evangelism, on the other hand, we are pro-actively proclaiming the Gospel to non-believing elect who are seeking salvation for themselves. Because evangelism is pro-active, we want to engage in a loving and exploratory conversation with whomever we encounter during our day. If we use apologetic arguments with everyone we meet, it's like trying to pick a fight with the world. In other words, the audience for evangelism is universally sought out, while the audience for apologetics seeks us out.

In evangelism, we construct that conversation in such a way as to elicit from the person we are talking to, immediately or over time, whether they are seeking God. That is, we want to know whether they are being drawn to God. Jn 6:44 "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him, and I will raise him up at the last day." If they are being drawn, then we share the Gospel, directing these sheep to their Shepherd. The Gospel is what compels the elect to confess their faith in Christ alone and thereby find him.

1Chr 28:9 "If you seek him, he will be found by you." James 4:8 "Come near to God and he will come near to you." Jn 6:37 "All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away." Jn 10:3 "The watchman opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out." Jn 10:14-15 "I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me – just as the Father knows me and I know the Father – and I lay down my life for the sheep." Jn 14:6 "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."

They would not be seeking Christ, and God would not be drawing them to Christ, if they were not God's to begin with.⁴ That's what these Scriptures are saying. Those who respond are his sheep. They hear his voice and are drawn to him by the Gospel we proclaim. If the person is at all responsive to the Gospel call, it is because the Holy Spirit has regenerated him. Though once he was deaf and blind, this person now hears his Shepherd's call and sees the kingdom (Lk 7:22). "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born from above." Jn 3:3

⁴ Eph 1:4-5 For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will. NIV

What drives the admixture of evangelism and apologetics is usually Arminian theology.

The Arminian evangelist has a different approach. In Arminian theology, believers are only regenerated by the Spirit *after* they profess Christ, not before. Arminians believe that Christ made it possible for anyone and everyone to respond to the Gospel – not just the elect. We are added to elect, they say, by professing Christ. Thus an Arminian’s Gospel presentation is thought to help bring about the outcome. The Spirit may “woo” someone to listen (as Wesley put it), but the job of the evangelist is to persuade the listener of the truth of it. As a result, the proofs we normally use in apologetics are employed to make the Gospel call more persuasive. Arminians not only sound the *kerygma* and the *evangelion*, but they bring to bear every possible argument to convince the listener of the truth of the Gospel. If Christ cannot save without our consent, then neither can the Spirit woo without our consent. Thus Arminians often find themselves entangled in fruitless arguments, ones in which the pigs finally turn and rend them (Mt 7:6). The Arminian combines apologetics with evangelism by doctrinal necessity.

Please, do not misunderstand what I’m saying here. I am not advocating an uninspired and purely pragmatic approach. I am not saying that we unemotionally proclaim the Gospel which people may take or leave as they see fit. We are not indifferent to our listeners. Nor are we abandoning rationality, reason, logic, and argument. The same questions which are raised by a person who is not elect and wants to condemn Christianity, may also be raised by a non-believing elect who wants to be saved. The difference is that non-elect persons don’t really want an answer, and they cannot actually accept the truth. It is beyond their comprehension in their fallen state. But those elect who have been regenerated by the Spirit desperately want to know what the truth is, and they are enabled by God to hear and believe it (Eph 2:8-9). We are to do all in our power to present the truth of the Gospel in a reasoned and passionate plea.

Our style is different when defending the faith than when evangelizing, but never our tone.

Because defending and evangelizing have different intentions, their style and content are also different. Questions asked by a seeker must be recast so as to answer the only question that matters: “Who do you say Jesus is?” (Mt 16:15). Therefore, the approach we use to remove obstacles that keep a seeker from answering that question is different than the one we use to refute errors. One is designed to elicit their response to this crucial question. The other is designed to silence those who object to us asking the question at all (Lk 1:20; Lk 4:35; Jn 8:44). The trick is to silence our accusers without offending them. They may still be elect, though not called today; we cannot know. Therefore, whether we speak the truth to those who cannot hear it, or to those who can, we speak it in love. If they are offended, it must be the Gospel truth that offends them and not us.

To *whomever* we speak, whether inside or outside the Church, we speak honestly, truthfully, and most importantly, we speak lovingly and graciously. We must never forget the love and grace which we ourselves received by Christ’s hands. It is Christ whom we represent to one another and to the world. We are *his* disciples⁵, *his* friends⁶, and *his* ambassadors⁷. Therefore, the words

⁵ John 13:35 By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.” NIV

⁶ John 15:15 I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master’s business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you. NIV

⁷ 2 Cor 5:20 We are therefore Christ’s ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. NIV

we speak, whether making a defense with apologetics, or going on the offensive with the Gospel, should be the very words of God and not our own.⁸ They are spoken as God speaks them: with mercy and compassion, with a heart pained by the hard-heartedness and stiff-necked rebellion that causes men to raise their fist to God (Job 38:15).

Even so, because we speak the truth unashamedly,⁹ we will cause division, just as Christ caused division. Matt 10:34-36 "Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to turn "“a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law – a man’s enemies will be the members of his own household.”” NIV It is the offense of the cross that divides the sheep from the goats. And yet, as non-believers we ourselves were offended by the cross;¹⁰ we too were children of wrath;¹¹ we too were at war with God and were his enemies.¹² We have compassion for the lost because we ourselves were once lost. Compassion, understanding, forgiveness, and grace must undergird our own attitude and speech in both apologetics and evangelism.

Why? Because there is no difference in response between unregenerated elect whose soil has not been prepared by the Holy Spirit, and unregenerated non-elect whose hearts are made of stone. But, as in the *Parable of the Sower*, there are some who are elect whose hearts nonetheless are filled with thorns and thistles, some who have been trodden-down on the path and hardened, and some whose soil is rich, waiting for the seed we carry, which is the word of the Gospel entrusted to us by Christ.¹³ We can detect the condition of their soil, and we can see if the seed takes root or not – by being observant and attentive to their needs, and not just to their words. It isn’t so much what they say or what they ask, as *how* they say it and *how* they ask it. Their body-language differs according to the condition of their heart. We cannot change their condition (see footnote 1). We can only plant the seed. But sometimes, sometimes, we can remove some of the debris of life that keeps the seed from hitting the soil, some of the weeds that have taken root over time and block the light, some of the misconceptions left behind by other evangelists and believers who were perhaps not as scrupulous in their handling of the Gospel truth as they should have been.

⁸ John 12:49 For I did not speak of my own accord, but the Father who sent me commanded me what to say and how to say it. Luke 12:11-12 "When you are brought before synagogues, rulers and authorities, do not worry about how you will defend yourselves or what you will say, for the Holy Spirit will teach you at that time what you should say." John 14:26 But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you. Eph 5:18-20 ...be filled with the Spirit. Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Eph 4:29 Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen. Luke 6:27-28 "But I tell you who hear me: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. NIV

⁹ Mark 8:38 If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his Father’s glory with the holy angels." NIV

¹⁰ John 6:56-61 Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in him. Just as the living Father sent me and I live because of the Father, so the one who feeds on me will live because of me... On hearing it, many of his disciples said, "This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?" Aware that his disciples were grumbling about this, Jesus said to them, "Does this offend you? NIV

¹¹ Eph 2:3 All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath. Titus 3:3 At one time we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures. We lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another.

¹² Rom 8:7 Because the carnal mind is enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be. KJV Rom 5:10 For if, when we were God’s enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life! NIV

¹³ 1 Cor 4:1 So then, men ought to regard us as servants of Christ and as those entrusted with the secret things of God. 1 Thess 2:4 On the contrary, we speak as men approved by God to be entrusted with the Gospel. We are not trying to please men but God, who tests our hearts. 1 Tim 6:20 Timothy, guard what has been entrusted to your care. 2 Tim 1:13-14 What you heard from me, keep as the pattern of sound teaching, with faith and love in Christ Jesus. Guard the good deposit that was entrusted to you-guard it with the help of the Holy Spirit who lives in us.

But we cannot prepare or repair their soil. That's the ministry of the Holy Spirit. And it takes time. God brings suffering to some of us as a means of preparation. Where there has been suffering, there are wounds and often scars. They need to be healed or excised before the seed of the Gospel can take root. Jesus Christ is the Great Physician, not us. The Spirit of Christ will apply the balm of Gilead to those he has struck. Just remember that God works through means, and we are the means he has chosen. We can bring words of life or words of death. We can condemn or forgive. The keys to the kingdom are in our hands, and we must be circumspect in our assessment of others, removing the log from our own eye before exercising judgment concerning the condition of others.

In the *Parable of the Barren Fig Tree*, Luke 13:6-9, we are told about this time of preparation.

"A man had a fig tree, planted in his vineyard, and he went to look for fruit on it, but did not find any. So he said to the man who took care of the vineyard, 'For three years now I've been coming to look for fruit on this fig tree and haven't found any. Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?' "'Sir,' the man replied, 'leave it alone for one more year, and I'll dig around it and fertilize it. If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down.'" NIV

Who is the one who owns the vineyard? That would be the Father. Who is the one taking care of the vineyard? That would be the Spirit. How do we know? Because we have never been told to "cut it down." Quite the opposite. *The Parable of the Wheat and the Tares*, Matt 13:24-30:

Another parable He put forth to them, saying: "The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field; but while men slept, his enemy came and sowed tares among the wheat and went his way. But when the grain had sprouted and produced a crop, then the tares also appeared. So the servants of the owner came and said to him, 'Sir, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then does it have tares?' He said to them, 'An enemy has done this.' The servants said to him, 'Do you want us then to go and gather them up?' But he said, 'No, lest while you gather up the tares you also uproot the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest, and at the time of harvest I will say to the reapers, "First gather together the tares and bind them in bundles to burn them, but gather the wheat into my barn.'" NKJV

So the one who digs around the roots and applies fertilizer to them is none of us. It is the Holy Spirit who regenerates, not the evangelist. But again, what exactly does a person say or do to identify himself as elect? What are visible signs of fertile soil? What indicates someone doesn't need correction, but conversion? It has to do with the hardness of the soil, or what we might call the "pig-tail."

The pig-tail (or pig-tale) is a self-identifying statement. It always begins with, "I don't believe..." Never disagree with such a statement. Take it at face value. Never call anyone a liar or a fool by arguing with them. If they tell you they don't believe something, simply believe them. Be gracious. Listen respectfully, smile, wish them a nice day, and then be on your way. Always leave on good terms. We don't want the next believer have to have pick up our mess before continuing the conversation with this person. Remember, we speak the words of God. Whether we speak, or another believer speaks, it is supposed to be God speaking. God always picks up a conversation where he left off, regardless of who spoke his words.

If the person responds, “I believe X...” where Y is actually true, then whether this person is elect or non-elect, we employ apologetics to remove this barrier to their understanding. If they don’t at least hear the truth from us, they can’t reject or accept it. Rejection or acceptance identifies them. Jn 10:26 “You do not believe because you are not my sheep.” The Bible says exactly what it means. The argument ends here. Our only goal is to get someone to the point of declaring what they do or do not believe. That’s all there is to apologetics, and that’s all there is to evangelism. We cannot turn goats into sheep or persuade non-elect persons into the kingdom. In a myriad of ways, we ask “Who do you say Jesus Christ is?” and then we listen. Simple. No guilt. No pressure. No embarrassment.

When we make an assertion, or we respond to a question, and we are met with a question, it is not a pig-tail. That is probably a seeker who sincerely wants an answer, and who is honestly confused or genuinely interested. It’s not always so, but often enough that we need to take the time to share the truth in an open and safe environment. They need to be free to ask questions, and we need to be patient with our answers. **Never answer more than what is being asked!** That’s my own foible. I thought it best to share that with you. Like any child who asks a question, we have to be sure of what it is that they are really asking, and be sure to give them only what they can grasp and handle at the time. If a five-year old child asks, “Where do babies come from?” we don’t get out a college text on human sexuality and begin to instruct him in reproductive practices. That’s not what the child wants to know, and it is certainly not what the child can handle.

A non-believer (or non-elect) may ask, “If God is sovereign, and God is good, why is there suffering in the world?” The non-elect, being hardened, isn’t really interested in the answer. He has brought up the question for one of two reasons. He may want to prove that if there is a God, and if there is suffering, then God is either not good, or not sovereign (an attack on God). He may want to show that Christians are uneducated and ill-prepared (an attack on the Church). This is probably an attack if you have several people around – he needs an audience. His unstated proposition is that “All Christians are fundamentalists, and all fundamentalists are ignorant.” Be prepared to engage the enemy intelligently.

Beginning a sentence with, “The Bible says...” is not persuasive to someone who rejects the Bible. Beginning with, “Jesus’ resurrection proves...” is not persuasive to someone who rejects the resurrection. Neither one speaks to the person in their native language, which is the language of logic and reason rather than revelation. The Bible is revelation, logically presented.

God’s truth is logical and rational. That’s the core of apologetics, but not of evangelism.

The Gospel is reasonably proclaimed, but it is not argued. It is nonsense to the natural man and that’s why we don’t need to argue the Gospel or try to persuade anyone of its veracity. It is what it is, and it is always effectual when presented to those who have been prepared by God’s Spirit. Until that happens, the gospel is nonsense to the natural man. 1Cor 2:14 “The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned.” NIV We need to discern the need before we can meet that need appropriately.