

▸ 4. “The ‘Do’s and Don’ts’ of Apologetics”: 7 Operating Principles to Keep in Mind as we Carry out the Apologetic Task

John Warwick Montgomery, “*Sensible Christianity*” [an audio series]

Outline by Philip Voon (I.S.O.T., Spring 1991); ed. Scott L. Keith (Concordia Univ. Irvine, Fall 1996); ed. Jennn Herzberg (Concordia Univ. Irvine, Fall 2001)

I. ▸ **Principle #1: Gospel First, Apologetics Second**

- A. ▸ We cannot *begin* conversation by apologetics, defending
- B. ▸ A defense is always a defense *of someone or something*—and that something must, of course, be communicated before it can be defended.
- C. ▸ Starting point in evangelism is always the Gospel.
 - 1. ▸ What do we mean by “the Gospel?” We mean what C. S. Lewis called “mere Christianity.”
 - 2. ▸ *Not* the peculiarities of your own Christian denomination—even those oddities which each of us holds dear
 - a. ▸ Example: *Not* the detailed events of the “end times”
 - b. ▸ Bumper sticker: “In case of rapture, this car will be unmanned”
 - c. ▸ = the “in-group” evangelical equivalent of a Masonic handshake (a means of identifying another “eschatologically-oriented evangelical”)
 - d. ▸ means nothing at all to non-Christian (except for, perhaps, his sexual understanding of it?!)
 - 3. ▸ The Gospel (or “mere Christianity”) is what Paul writes in 1 Cor. 15: “I delivered to you what I first received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day in accordance with the Scriptures...”
 - 4. ▸ is classically summed up in the three “Ecumenical Creeds” (Apostles’ Creed, Nicene Creed, Athanasian Creed) which all Orthodox Christians have considered the essence of Christianity
- D. ▸ Avoid use “stereotyped formulas”
 - 1. ▸ Example: “The Four Spiritual Laws” or the Navigators’ “Topical Memory System” (section on “The Gospel” (7 vss.))?
 - 2. ▸ We use such things because we are so nervous—and they *do* keep us “on track.”
 - 3. ▸ But we must know the Gospel and the contemporary culture well enough that we are *not limited* to one single presentation.
 - 4. ▸ The Gospel is always the same. But we must *not* imagine that the psychology of conversion will be the same for all people
 - a. ▸ Cf. the diversity of a Peter, a Paul, the Ethiopian eunuch, etc.
 - b. ▸ It is important to present the Gospel at the level at which a particular non-Christian is.

II. ▸ **Principle #2: Don’t give people problems they don’t have.**

- A. ▸ Apologetics is, by its very nature, a *defensive* measure.
- B. ▸ But life is messy enough in this sinful world!
- C. ▸ Don’t harangue.
- D. ▸ Don’t waste time by not listening; and *always* take what the non-Christian says seriously.

- E. ▶ is ludicrous to go out of a course like this filled with enthusiasm, corner some poor fellow and say, “Doubtless you have wondered why the virgin birth of Christ is the case!”

III. ▶ **Principle #3: Discover the *real* problem.**

- A. ▶ Danger #1: Not taking the non-Christian’s problem seriously *enough*
 - 1. ▶ by assuming that every “apologetics problem” is really a cover-up for a moral problem—there are no *real* apologetic problems
 - 2. ▶ is the “fundie” danger
 - 3. ▶ Example: pietistic Christian sitting next to a biology professor on a bus. In conversation the professor says, “I don’t think I could consider Christianity. I’m a professor of biology and have become convinced over the years of the truth of evolutionary theory.” Answer the pietist: “Aha! So you’re living with a woman out of wedlock, are you?”
 - a. ▶ Christian pietist imagines that the non-Christian realizes this fact and is just being *perverse*
 - 4. ▶ Root of all of this is the Christian’s fear
- B. ▶ Danger #2: Taking the problems that the non-Christian presents *too* seriously
 - 1. ▶ Christian needs to be sensitive at this point, to analyze carefully
 - 2. ▶ Rule is: Always take what the non-Christian says seriously and answer him seriously—no matter how silly the question seems to you
 - 3. ▶ Do the same with the next question, the next and the next.
 - 4. ▶ But if a non-Christian finds his way back to the first question he asked, it might be a clue that there is something else going on.
 - a. ▶ You might ask, “Are you sure there isn’t something deeper bothering you?”

IV. ▶ **Principle #4: Always keep your goal in mind.**

- A. ▶ Your goal is always to get a man “over the obstacles” in the way of his search for the truth, and on to the cross of Christ.
 - 1. ▶ to the “scandal of the cross”
 - 2. ▶ As much as is possible, push the non-Christian *toward the cross* of Christ.
- B. ▶ Remember that apologetics is *not* systematic theology!
 - 1. ▶ You are *not* called upon in an apologetic situation to set forth the one best and final theological solution to everything!
 - 2. ▶ You have a much *wider range* of possible arguments in apologetics—wider, for instance, than if you were trying to set forth a systematic theology
 - a. ▶ You may, in an apologetic situation, sometimes employ arguments you would almost certainly *not* use if you were writing a systematic theology.
 - i. ▶ Example: Genesis & evolution as dealt with when writing a systematic theology vs. as dealt with in an apologetic conversation with a “hard-core” evolutionist
 - ii. ▶ Possible reply to non-Christian in latter situation: “But there are many highly educated Christians who are both well-versed in science and who believe in the full inerrancy of Scripture. Some of them hold that Genesis is, in many aspects, a poetic depiction of earthly beginnings. So this should not be so important as to cause you to dismiss the Christian claim.”
 - b. ▶ is *not* to say that this is the “best answer”
 - i. ▶ It may be that you would almost certainly reject it.

- ii. ▶ But all we are saying is that in apologetic conversations, you might use it.
 - iii. ▶ are enough supports to get a person to “the offense of the cross”
 - 3. ▶ But present *only* views that are probabilistically sound and maintained by competent scholars who hold to the basic soundness of the Bible
 - a. ▶ “No Lame Brains Wanted!”
- V. ▶ **Principle #5: Remember that apologetics is a species of evangelism.**
 - A. ▶ apologist can and should use all the proper evangelistic techniques in the apologetic task.
 - 1. ▶ can even use books on evangelistic techniques
 - B. ▶ can use books on counseling techniques (e.g., Christian must develop enough sensitivity in himself that he can recognize other people’s needs)
- VI. ▶ **Principle #6: Remember that apologetics is a species of mission work.**
 - A. ▶ All the “ground rules” and techniques of missions also apply in apologetics.
 - B. ▶ Avoid specialized, “in group” language!
 - 1. ▶ Why is Lewis so effective in his writings? He wrote English!
 - 2. ▶ Cf. Other Christian authors who write using the “in-group” language of evangelicalism (and are, therefore, incomprehensible to non-evangelicals)
 - C. ▶ Must learn the language of our day, our culture
 - 1. ▶ must read other views—it is your spiritual task to do so!
 - a. ▶ Evangelicals often avoid secular writings as “sinful” or “a waste of time.”
 - b. ▶ But the avoiding of hard work is no more than intellectual laziness on part of evangelicals.
 - c. ▶ Think about it. This room would be packed this evening if this seminar had to do with relationships, inner conflicts, etc. (because evangelicals are so obsessed with their own subjectivity)
 - d. ▶ The evangelical is *not* usually drawn, however, to seminars which ask for hard intellectual work.
- VII. ▶ **Principle #7: Know where *you* are.**
 - A. ▶ Work on your *own* personal problems; face your *own* “hang ups.”
 - 1. ▶ Someone once said, “No one brings another closer to Christ than he is himself.”
 - 2. ▶ Remember one of the few things of value that Tillich said: “Doubt is a test of faith”
 - B. ▶ What is called for is simply integrity and hard work
 - 1. ▶ Do your research.
 - 2. ▶ Read, and read *broadly*.
 - 3. ▶ Stay abreast of the issues.
 - C. ▶ Build up a personal library of good, solid apologetic literature.

1. ▶ We are in a secular, pluralistic society in which we find educated, professional people who have intellectual “hang-ups” over Christianity—and it is with this kind of person that we need to be able to communicate effectively!