

4. Apologetics training

A framework for training ordinary Christians like you and me in apologetics.

Things you'll need to run this training:

- *some pieces of butcher's paper,*
- *markers,*
- *pens and handout (see at end of this section) printed for each member.*

Time to run the training: *about 90 minutes.*

References: Alister McGrath, *Bridge Building: Effective Christian Apologetics* (IVP, 1992), Andrew Ford, "Thinking About Worldview" (Moore College Philosophy 3 Course Notes)

What is apologetics?

Christian apologetics is not about being apologetic about what we believe. It is an "*apologia* for the Christian faith - a presentation and defence of its claims to truth and relevance in the great market-place of ideas." (Alister McGrath, *Bridge Building*, 9).

The goal of Christian apologetics is not just to present the truth (although truth is a good thing!) - it is also to show how the truth is good news for whoever is asking the question. "The chief goal of Christian apologetics is to create an intellectual and imaginative climate conducive to the birth and nurture of faith - faith in all its fulness and richness." (McGrath, *Bridge Building*, 9).

This means it's not about us. Our goal is not to be seen as clever. Our goal is not to convince ourselves - in fact someone who is trying to convince him- or her-self that Christianity is true will often fail in apologetics because they do not consider the needs of the person they are talking to. Our motive and method is love - to use questions as an opportunity to respectfully share good news with another person made and loved by God, someone who is just as in need of a saviour as we are.

Key verse for today

*The one who gives an answer before he listens—
this is foolishness and disgrace for him. (Prov. 18:13)*

The questions we are asked (or ask ourselves)

>> Have a think on your own about some of the questions which you have been asked about the Christian faith. Then we'll go around the circle and contribute one at a time to the butcher's paper. (As you're writing them on the butcher's paper, try to pre-sort them into the categories introduced below: correspondence, coherence and livability.)

Understanding the person behind the question

While we have probably all been asked some of these questions at some point, not all questions are the same – because behind each question is a person, and people are unique. The same question can have different “questions behind the question”.

>> Pick one question from the board and get people to suggest what may be behind the question, using these four categories:

- **The person.** Describe what might be going on for the person asking the question. Who are they? How are they feeling? What is motivating their question?
- **The worldview.** A worldview is ‘a framework or set of fundamental beliefs through which we view the world and our calling and future in it.’ (J.H. Olthius) Things seem obvious to me because of my (often unexamined) background beliefs. What general beliefs are behind this person’s statement? What can we affirm and what might be incompatible with the Christian worldview?
- **The assumptions.** What is the person assuming in asking this question? (These may be things that you agree with or not: i.e. the question “how can the Bible be true if it commands slavery?” assumes both that slavery is morally wrong (which I agree with) and that the Bible promotes it (which I disagree with).
- **The issues.** What theological issues are raised by this question (sin, predestination, moral responsibility, etc...)? What things does the Bible teach that touch on them? Can you think of any Bible verses or themes that are relevant?

The AC/DC model

Once we have understood the person and the question behind the question, we can begin to form a response. I like to structure my response using the AC/DC method.

As an example, I’m going to use the question “why does the Bible command genocide?”

1. **Affirm:** always begin by affirming the person for asking the question, signalling that you are please to be wrestling with it. This involves not just saying “good question” but actually giving weight to the issue they are raising. The goal is not to be defensive or antagonistic.

If you’ve done this bit right, the person should be able to say “yes! this is exactly the type of person I want to talk with about this”.

“Yes, it’s a really important and challenging question – at times when I read about the violence of the Old Testament it is hard not to ask ‘God, is that you?’”

2. **Clarify:** make sure you are both on the same page – ask questions if necessary to make sure you don’t jump to a conclusion about what is being asked (remember our guesses about the person, their worldview, issues, etc? Now is the time to check if you’re not sure about any of them). This is also an opportunity to define the issue accurately, by being explicit about the conflict. This may sometimes require

you to gently clarify any obvious misunderstandings or ambiguities in the question.

If you've done your job really well the other person should be able to say "yes! I couldn't put it better myself!"

"So to clarify, are you interested in how a Christian can reconcile the idea of a loving God with the idea that, for example, he commanded Joshua to kill the Canaanites in the Old Testament conquest narratives? ... It does seem a lot like genocide doesn't it?"

3. **Disrupt:** introduce information or a perspective which invites the questioner to reconsider the perceived conflict. The goal is not necessarily to convince them totally at this stage, but to start a dialogue about how it might be possible to see the world differently.

"It's horrific how in genocides the strong use their power to destroy a weaker people out of hate or pride - as when some white colonialists slaughtered indigenous people. Thankfully God never condones, or commands, this and we're right to oppose genocide.

But interestingly, in the conquest narrative it is actually the opposite. The more powerful nations surrounding Israel had become so corrupt that God had to intervene, using tiny Israel to punish and restrain their evil.

Israel's mission was to disrupt the corrupt military and religious infrastructure of the nations (though no doubt civilians were killed, the language of complete decimation in Josh 6:21 etc is probably a vivid figure of speech).

Of course, if this is true it's still deeply challenging. It depicts God who alone as creator alone has the right to decide to punish or destroy both individuals and nations (God reminds Israel that it is not exempt from this!). From this perspective, then, what's wrong with genocide it that humans are appointing themselves judge over another people-group, a role that only God can have.

4. **Christ:** show how Jesus resolves our questions and conflicts, and ultimately satisfies like no other worldview can.

"So can we hold our picture of loving-and-forgiving-God with this picture of judge-of-the-nations-God - one who gets passionately involved the the world, even getting his hands dirty? When I see Jesus dying for our sins on the cross, I see these two strands reconciled: the cross shows that evil and corruption is not okay, and yet God will bleed to make forgiveness for all of us possible."

Different ways to disrupt a question

In the example above, we disrupted the question by having another look at some of the unspoken assumptions behind the question, for example:

- That genocide is bad (actually we agreed with this one!)
- That the Old Testament examples of war involve a powerful nation against a smaller one
- That the Old Testament examples of war were targeted indiscriminately at killing every last person with no military objectives
- That God's love never involves judgment or punishment, and nobody (even God) has the right to judge an entire nation.

Different questions have different types of assumptions which can be disrupted:
(Here is where you can point out how you've divided the questions up sneakily on the butcher's paper).

- **Correspondence questions** involve a perceived conflict between (a) an assumption about something external to the Christian worldview and (b) an assumption about something believed to be necessary to the Christian worldview. For example, if I assume that the laws of nature are unchanging, then this will conflict with the Christian account of a God who occasionally intervenes from outside the closed system of the universe. This raises the question of miracles.

To disrupt a correspondence question requires a challenge to (a) or (b). For example, someone may believe (a) that the world was made in billions of years, and (b) that the Bible says it was made in six days. I could show them either (a) the world was not made in billions of years, or (b) that the Bible contains three different creation stories, and many Christians read them together as answering questions about creation (who, why?) that are best understood as complementary to the questions of the natural sciences (when, in what order?).

- **Coherence questions** involve a perceived conflict between (a) something assumed to be part of the Christian worldview, and (b) another thing assumed to be part of the Christian worldview. Answering these requires clarifying one or both of the doctrines involved. For example, (a) Moses forbids humans to eat pork, but (b) Christians eat pork. To answer this requires clarifying the context of (a): the law of Moses (the Torah) was never addressed to Gentiles (in fact they were explicitly *not invited* to live as Jews) and that the New Covenant instituted by Jesus thus explicitly supersedes many aspects of the Torah in order to allow Gentiles to participate in the Kingdom (Mark 7:19).
- **Livability questions** involve assumptions about what it would mean to live out a faith in Jesus - how workable is this belief system in practice? There is a conflict between (a) something that gives meaning to my life and (b) an assumed loss inherent in Christianity. Answering these questions normally involves acknowledging the assumed loss or clarifying it - sometimes the concern is partly or wholly founded, and Jesus warns us to count the cost: Matt 10:37. But it also involves giving your own testimony to how life with Jesus, while involving sacrifices and hardship, is still worth it (Matt 19:29, Phil 3:7-8).

>> Have a look at the correspondence, coherence and livability questions we're put on the board. Which type of question do you personally gravitate towards? Which type of question do you most often get asked?

Some questions which have come up recently

Correspondence	Coherence	Living faith
Hasn't science/evolution disproved the Bible?	If God is loving then how can he send people to hell?	How can you know if you are a Christian?
Doesn't suffering disprove God?	If God loves you, why would he want you to feel guilty?	How can you be a Christian and a feminist?
Why does God condemn gay people?	If we're already going to heaven, why does it matter if we do good or bad things?	Why can't I live however I want? Isn't Christianity restrictive?
Why is the Bible anti-sex, how can love be wrong?	If God can do anything, then why can't he just forgive without the whole Jesus thing?	
Why doesn't God reveal himself to us in person?	What is the Holy Spirit?	
Surely there is a more probable explanation for the resurrection?	Christians do X, isn't that contradictory?	
Hasn't science disproved the possibility of miracles?	If you know you're going to heaven why do you bother going to church or doing good works?	
How do you know that Christianity is right?	Doesn't the Bible contradict itself?	
	How does predestination make sense? Isn't it unfair?	

Practical task

(You'll want to leave a good 20-30 minutes for this)

>> In groups of 2-3, choose one of our questions and begin to fill out the worksheet for apologetics training. It doesn't matter if you don't finish now. Report back to the whole group what other resources you think you'll need to better answer these questions.

Some final tips

- ✓ **Gain the home side advantage:** you know what the study is going to be on because you picked the passage. And you know what types of questions are likely to come up. So do your research! See if you can have a three sentence answer ready for most issues.
- ✓ **Take your time (clarify the question),** Don't rush in. If necessary buy yourself some thinking time by saying "if I understand you correctly, you're asking...".
- ✓ **Be thoroughly Biblical, but don't just "proof text".** Proof texting is when you just throw a bunch of bible verses at people. We need to engage with the question and bring the whole of the Bible's teaching to bear on the question. Refer to specific passages, but explain and show rather than just recite.
- ✓ **Be certain,** don't be afraid to affirm the things which need to be affirmed. On some things you just need to "bite the bullet" even if you don't think the other person will like it.
- ✓ **Be uncertain** that said, there are lots of things on which the Bible isn't clear. We don't know what the very long life spans in Genesis are about, for instance. And it's okay to admit that. Or to flag that Christians have different views on something.
- ✓ **Delight in the doctrines:** rather than being apologetic about what we can't know about the Trinity, emphasise the real payoff of the difficult doctrines - "what the Bible says about the Trinity can be difficult to understand but it's also one of the most amazing and beautiful things to apprehend, because it gives us a beautiful picture of relationship at the heart of the universe"
- ✓ **Get your facts straight** never answer a question if you don't have the facts straight. You can always say "I'll check that out for you" (and then go and do it!)
- ✓ **Don't raise other issues** keep to the question at hand (don't say "well this raises the question of predestination).
- ✓ **Do the Westwing thing:** On the Westwing, when CJ Cregg is asked a really nasty question from the press corps the answer normally is "I don't agree with the premise behind the question". For example, what is the problem with this question: "why does the Old Testament command polygamy?"
- ✓ **Appeal to authorities where appropriate:** Some things are best backed up by people who know more about what they're talking about, such as historians whose field is first-century history.
- ✓ **Let me answer your question with a question.** It's appropriate sometimes to explore the worldview behind the question with another question - not to be annoying, but to help us see what is really behind the issue.
- ✓ **Use stories, personal examples, fiction** - sometimes it is more effective to illustrate something than just to say it. It makes the truth attractive not just intellectually true.
- ✓ **The story is the answer,** for most questions the story of the Bible gives the best context. How can we trust a God who allows suffering - because we meet his true character through the story of creation, fall and redemption.
- ✓ **If you can't remember it, they won't either :** try to keep your answers really tight and succinct - if you have a fourteen page answer to read out chances are it'll get lost.