

A large, light gray circle is positioned in the upper left quadrant of the page. A thick, black diagonal bar extends from the bottom left towards the right, partially overlapping the bottom edge of the circle. The word "FOREWORD" is printed in a bold, black, sans-serif font to the right of the circle.

FOREWORD

It was one of those days you won't forget. Indeed, it was one of those days you don't want to forget.

I made the drive across the peninsula of Florida from Bradenton to West Palm Beach. The lead pastor of Grace Fellowship: A Church for All the Nations asked me to do an onsite mini-consultation. My purpose was to look at the church facilities, to see the surrounding communities, and to offer any insights I could within the short timeframe of the consultation.

But there was another major component of the consultation. I had the incredible opportunity to listen to the lead pastor, Jeff Robinson, for several hours. I guess I asked a few questions and responded to Jeff's questions. But the real treat was hearing from the heart of the pastor who loved his church, the members of the church, and the community where they lived.

The simple summary of my one-day journey was profound. I heard how God was working in a place where many people said no to God and said no to churches. I heard God's yes to a church in South Florida. I heard how the gospel of Christ was reaching thousands through this church. I heard how seventy-two different first-generation nations are represented in this church today.

Jeff knows that residents of South Florida, like people all over the world, have questions about God and faith—lots of questions.

Jeff knows how to communicate God's truth to them. He knows how to answer their questions and demonstrate the love of Christ. Grace Fellowship has followed the lead of their pastor. The members are likewise reaching a diversity of people from incredible backgrounds, ethnicities, and nations.

I entered into this consultation wondering how I could help this church. I prayed that God would give me the wisdom to say the words I need to say. But I returned to Bradenton with the keen awareness that I was not the conveyor of wise words. Jeff and his church did not hear from me as much as I heard from God.

The questions are obvious. How did he do it? Even better, how did God do it through this pastor and this church? How did the seemingly impossible become possible? People have asked Jeff those questions countless times. Now, we have a book that tells us how.

This incredible book is the perfect balance of mind and heart. Jeff Robinson, a pastor of a church in South Florida where seventy-two first-generation nations are represented, knows how to connect with the world and culture. He has the heart to love people and to reach them. And he has the academic prowess to know how to guide challenging biblical conversations. This book, *Persuasive Apologetics: The Art of Handling Tough Questions Without Pushing People Away*, will introduce a new wave of apologetics and evangelism to those who truly desire to reach a lost and hurting world.

It's a book, but it is so much more. It is the story of God's work. And it is nothing less than the story of God's miraculous powers at work today.

—Dr. Thom S. Rainer
Founder and CEO, Church Answers
Author, *I Am a Christian*



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book was made possible with the help of more people than I can name. My church family, Grace Fellowship: A Church for All Nations—with seventy-two first-generation nations represented at the time of writing—serves as a beautiful example of a community rigorously and graciously engaging a plethora of worldviews. I owe a debt of gratitude to our elders, who have encouraged this project. Thank you for your kingdom perspective. To our pastors and directors, it’s an honor serving with you.

To my parents, I cannot fully express my gratitude for your sacrifice on my behalf. Your example of engaging with ideas formed my love for reading and learning at a very early age. Although I may not have fully appreciated it then, thank you for not allowing me to squander my childhood in front of screens and video games. See this volume as a testament to your commitment to training your children in the Scriptures.

To my colleagues, professors, and ministry mentors, our countless discussions continue to be invaluable over the years. Your willingness to lend an ear to my ideas means more than you know. Thank you for sharpening me. I owe a debt of gratitude to the universities and professors that are including this book in their courses. I am also grateful for churches who have found this text

useful for group discipleship ministry. All of the proceeds from this book are allocated to the ministry of Grace Fellowship: A Church for All Nations in order to reach Palm Beach County, South Florida, and the world with the Good News of Jesus Christ.

To the top-grade academics who are still in the trenches of frontline ministry work, you are my heroes. To the local church ministers who, with the purpose of loving people well, resist intellectual stagnation and continue to read peer-reviewed publications (thus enduring the eye rolls of those who do not consider such things “practical”), you inspire me. Press on.

To my beautiful wife and the world’s best editor, you are a precious gift from God and a genuine Proverbs 31 woman. Your selflessness and ability to dialogue about numerous arcane topics humble me. You are genuinely an indescribable blessing.

To our sons, you are young as I write this, but I pray you grow to be men of God. May our innumerable imaginary battles against Philistines, pirates, and bad guys, with the help of our beloved heroes (Beowulf, David’s mighty men, and King Jan Sobieski, with his winged hussars), translate to a lifelong calling to defend the defenseless and never forsake the battle for truth. Be courageous, and know that your father will always stand shoulder to shoulder with you for what’s right.

Finally, I am thankful to God for the indescribable riches of his grace. Without his work in my life, I would still be spiritually dead and without hope. My prayer is that this book will assist Christians in removing intellectual roadblocks to the gospel while being sensitive to the leading of the Holy Spirit when interacting with those who may not yet believe. To God be the glory.



INTRODUCTION

We are not merely imperfect creatures who must be improved; we are, as Newman said, “rebels who must lay down our arms.”

—C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*

When it comes to academic writing, specificity is the name of the game. A three-hundred-plus-page dissertation can focus on what sort of flea colony was living in Gottfried Leibniz’s third dog and its relevance to his unfinished monograph on what could have led to a breakthrough in seventeenth-century Flemish higher calculus to the degree of . . . you get the picture. Academics is all about focus, and that’s a good thing. It’s how we add to the body of scholarly knowledge. It’s how we avoid rabbit trails and hone our ability to think well. Behind most successful and timeless popular-level books or films sits the scholar. There is always a “mind behind.”

Whether or not we realize it, we are indebted to the scholarly community of men and women who have dedicated their lives to studies that, to be frank, elicit yawns from many of us. I am grateful for committed scholars. The person whose life is dedicated to seeking truth or the good, whether elusive philosophical proofs or

a cure for debilitating illnesses, is worthy of our respect. A willingness to self-assess and, if need be, discard one's hypotheses if they are shown to be lacking distinguishes thinkers from fanatics who happen to have a degree next to their name. True scholars follow the evidence and resist the urge to cancel their opponents.

This book, however, is a bit different. Rather than a hyper-specific academic monograph, it is an overview of some of our time's pressing faith questions. Whereas my past writings have been laser-focused, this work casts a wide net because, outside the ivory towers of academia, we often do not have the luxury of tightly focused conversations about our faith. It is quite simply the world in which we live. Therefore, I intend to give you *the essentials to be an effective witness for Christ and nothing more*. I'll save the other stuff for future writing projects where we can really geek out together. Yes, we'll walk through some historical nuggets and philosophical handles, but only as they relate to the task of guiding others to a warranted confidence in Jesus Christ. Our focus will be broad because of the vast scope of pushback points in our present world.

Just a heads-up: The first three chapters deal with foundational or "basement" stuff. We will talk about why we should do apologetics and how to use apologetic tactics, the power of a person's worldview presuppositions, the importance of our demeanor in being persuasive, and how to combine these tools into a versatile and eclectic approach. If you are new to apologetics and find sections of this book a bit dense, let not your heart be troubled. Intentional illustrations are planted at (hopefully) strategic points to help refocus what may at first seem abstract. It's not until chapter 4 that we get into the meat of doing apologetics in a direct fashion. The heart of this book is twofold: understanding that there is often more that lurks below intellectual-sounding objections to Christianity, and developing the ability to use undercutting defeaters to destabilize opposing worldviews. This is all with the aim of reaping a greater evangelistic harvest through the tools and methods that God has ordained.

For his glory,
Jeff

CALL OF DUTY (NOT THE VIDEO GAME)

I am not a gamer, unless you count pre-internet-era afternoon sessions of *Duck Hunt* and *Super Mario Bros.* at a friend's house while trying to drown out the sound of Mom's TV in the other room as she watched *As the World Turns*. I'm actually too afraid to try gaming at this stage in life simply because I may like it. If I were to like it, I would most certainly fail life as a whole. It's a margin thing. But I do remember when *Call of Duty* first hit the market. Friends, colleagues, and family members devoured it like pepperoni pizza at a Baptist youth lock-in. But beyond all the tactics, fanfare, and less-than-sanctified trash-talking with online opponents is the very "name" of the game: call of duty.

The game is based on the Allied nations answering the call to stand against the Axis powers in World War II. This was no minor insurgency against poorly equipped rebels armed with outdated muzzleloaders. This call was against the premier industrial and military powers of continental Europe and the Far East. Along with its cutting-edge military technology and blitzkrieg tactics, the German army struck fear into the hearts of the world. The deeply embedded samurai Bushido code and, as Dan Carlin puts it, "intensity" in Japanese culture shaped an Allied opponent who preferred suicide at one's own hand or collective banzai charges

rather than facing capture.¹ They were no joke. These were just *some* of the opponents faced by farm boys, taxi drivers, schoolteachers, and young men with forged birth certificates who answered the call of duty. It wasn't a video game or a virtual reality. It was real life. Everything had real-world implications. In the following section, I'd like to suggest a parallel to the Christian duty of giving a reasoned defense of the faith.

Duty Matters: The Christian Duty to Contend for the Truth

In his signature work *Reasonable Faith*, the great apologist William Lane Craig quotes J. Gresham Machen's ominous warning, "False ideas are the greatest obstacles to the reception of the Gospel. We may preach with all the fervor of a reformer and yet succeed only in winning a straggler here and there, if we permit the whole collective thought of the nation to be controlled by ideas which prevent Christianity from being regarded as anything more than a harmless delusion."² Notice *when* Machen made this observation: 1913. Even then, Machen saw where the long-term damaging effects of higher criticism of the Bible and Darwinian materialism would lead.³ Craig concludes, "Unfortunately, Machen's warning went unheeded, and biblical Christianity retreated into the intellectual closet of Fundamentalism."⁴ While there were pockets of Christian

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- 1 Dan Carlin, "Supernova in the East I," July 14, 2018, in *Hardcore History*, podcast, MP3 audio, 4:28:17, <https://podcasts.apple.com/ca/podcast/show-62-supernova-in-the-east-i/id173001861?i=1000415837465>; editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, "Seppuku," Britannica, last modified September 10, 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/seppuku>.
 - 2 J. Gresham Machen, "Christianity and Culture," *Princeton Theological Review* 11 (1913): 7; cited in William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics*, 3rd ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008), 17.
 - 3 See Archer's rebuttal of the JEPD theory that the Old Testament is little more than plagiarized Canaanite literature: Gleason L. Archer, *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction*, rev. ed. (Chicago: Moody, 2007), 71–153.
 - 4 Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 17.

leaders who took seriously the call to intellectually contend for the truth, on a macro level the Western church either opted for a cold deistic traditionalism or a shallow anti-intellectual emotionalism.

For example, in reaction to the famous Scopes Trial, Fundamentalists adopted the mantra “Read your Bible.” Not surprisingly, the broader culture assumed that the Bible and science were mortal enemies. Many seminaries, whose task was to equip ministers and missionaries to be effective and faithful Christian leaders, capitulated to prevailing theories of their day that essentially gutted the gospel. The results were tragic. How could pastors preach the gospel with passion if their training undermined the veracity of the biblical text from which a sermon is supposed to come? How were missionaries to suffer persecution for the “good news” if such news was not accurate? You see, biblical passion and commitment are grounded in a confidence in the truth. Why study how to give a reasoned defense if the Christian worldview is full of holes? Nobody wants to buy a house sitting on a fault line. Even if you believe the tenets of historic Christianity, why bother with apologetics if reason and evidence play no significant role in Christian faith?

Craig’s personal story bears witness to this decline. After earning his doctorate under Wolfhart Pannenberg, Craig accepted a full-time teaching position in philosophy of religion at an evangelical divinity school. There, after six years, he faced a potentially career-threatening set of circumstances that ultimately propelled him into the international spotlight. According to Craig, the dean of the seminary decided that “apologetics was no longer a useful discipline for the church.”⁵ Imagine having two earned European doctorates, being fluent in German and French, and having no employment.

Devastated by this unexpected blow, Craig reached such a point of financial desperation that he confesses, “I was reduced

5 William Lane Craig, “What Is the Meaning of Failure for the Christian?,” sermon, Johnson Ferry Baptist Church, January 1, 2007, Marietta, GA, <https://www.reasonablefaith.org/videos/lectures/what-is-the-meaning-of-failure-for-the-christian>.

to calling churches in the yellow pages for support.”⁶ Nevertheless, Craig identifies this apparent tragedy as the catalyst that eventually led to the broadening of his influence. He states, “It was only by being kicked out of the little evangelical pond that we were catapulted into this broader world of scholarship and ministry that we have enjoyed since then and that we continue today through Reasonable Faith. It started because of a seeming disaster.”⁷ Being catapulted out of the evangelical world led Craig to the University of Louvain, where he completed postdoctoral work in divine foreknowledge and human freedom, as well as the theory of time. Decades later, contemporary Christianity is now enjoying a virtual renaissance of apologetics thanks to the labors of Craig, Alvin Plantinga, Gary Habermas, John Lennox, Paul Copan, and J. P. Moreland, just to name a few. The current apologetics movement resembles a return to the charge given to the early church, “contend for the faith” (Jude 3).

Why is there a moral duty for believers to explain the veracity of the Christian worldview? First, Christians have a responsibility to contend for the truth because of the gospel’s eternal ramifications. By this, I mean we should have a deep sense of compassion for unbelievers. The Christian understanding of hell should produce this at a basic level. Maybe this is in part why the apostle Paul reminded the church at Corinth, “Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade others” (2 Cor. 5:11). Christianity is a missionary faith. The exclusivity of the Christian message calls for a precise and loving articulation of the gospel. Jesus sent his disciples into the world to make disciples of all nations (Matt. 28:19–20). If the gospel of Jesus is true, we have a moral responsibility to share it with others (1 Peter 3:15).

Second, Christians have a duty to contend for the truth because it glorifies God (1 Peter 3:15). The psalmist writes, “Ascribe to the

6 Craig, “What Is the Meaning of Failure?”

7 Kevin Harris and William Lane Craig, “Does God Slam Doors Shut?,” October 19, 2009, in *Reasonable Faith Podcast*, MP3 audio, 21:08, <https://www.reasonablefaith.org/media/reasonable-faith-podcast/does-god-slam-doors-shut>.

LORD, O families of the peoples, ascribe to the LORD glory and strength! Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name; bring an offering, and come into his courts! Worship the LORD in the splendor of holiness; tremble before him, all the earth!" (Ps. 96:7–9). A significant thread of the Christian gospel is the worthiness of God to receive obedience and worship.

Before going further, let me clarify that there's a vast categorical difference between God seeking his glory and us seeking our own. For example, consider the opening line of Rick Warren's *The Purpose Driven Life*, "It's not about you."⁸ Most people would likely offer verbal agreement, even if their life choices say the opposite. If we were to dig into the thought, we'd probably hear something like this, "It's true that it's not about you, and if you think it is about you, then you have a problem." What is the problem? Why is it that we don't like being around self-consumed people? At the heart of it, it bothers us because deep down, we know it's morally inappropriate and irrational to live life like it's all about "me." The self-consumed person is living in a false reality.

It's easy to point this out in others. The ancient Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar built a massive golden statue of himself and commanded everyone to worship it. This ranks high on the "yikes!" scale. God later disciplined Nebuchadnezzar to help him see that it wasn't about him (Dan. 4:28–37). The Communist North Korean government promotes the worship of its dictator Kim Jong Un.⁹ Crazy, right? But how do I respond when a customer support representative is less than supportive or when an EGRP

8 See Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life: What on Earth Am I Here For?*, exp. ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 21.

9 Jayant Bhandari reports, "North Korea is a perfect tyranny. . . . They have organized this tyranny in ways that were unimaginable to me, and people have been completely brainwashed. If this country goes through a real election today, I'm absolutely sure Kim Jong-un would win more than 99% of the votes without even trying to manipulate it. People are slaves in that country." Jonathan Roth, "North Koreans Are Literally Worshipping Kim Jong-un," *Business Insider*, July 3, 2017, <https://www.businessinsider.com/north-koreans-worship-kim-jong-un-2017-7>.

(extra-grace-required person) needs even more of my limited time? Again, it's a piece of cake to identify the "it's all about me" attitude in others, but it's super-easy to miss the log sticking out of my own eye (Matt. 7:1–6).

On the other hand, how do we make sense of the claim that it is all about the glory of God? Because it is! Far from megalomania, it is altogether right and proper for God to desire praise and glory because *he actually deserves it*. It's wrong for us to take the credit because we don't deserve it. The apostle Paul puts it this way, "For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen" (Rom. 11:36). The word *glory* essentially "represents Hebrew *kabod* with the root idea of 'heaviness' and so of 'weight' or 'worthiness.'"¹⁰ R. E. Nixon argues that God's glory is the most important concept in the Bible.¹¹ Defending the truth brings glory to God because it helps people understand who God really is and how he is worthy of their worship. As we will see, God's glory becomes magnificently clear in Jesus Christ.

Third, contending for the truth is quite simply obeying God's directive. Jesus teaches that loving God included the use of one's mind, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets" (Matt. 22:37–40). Loving God involves meeting others' practical needs (Matt. 25:35–40; James 2:14–17). But Jesus also includes properly *thinking* about God. Effectively contending

10 R. E. Nixon, "Glory," in *New Bible Dictionary*, eds. I. Howard Marshall, A. R. Millard, J. I. Packer, and D. J. Wiseman, 3rd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1996), 414.

11 Nixon, "Glory," 414. Easton writes, "The phrase 'Give glory to God' (Josh. 7:19; Jer. 13:16) is a Hebrew idiom meaning, 'Confess your sins.' The words of the Jews to the blind man, 'Give God the praise' (John 9:24), are an adjuration to confess. They are equivalent to 'Give God the glory by speaking the truth.'" *Easton's Bible Dictionary* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1893), 291.

for the truth requires loving God with the mind as well as the heart, although we have to be careful not to draw too stark a distinction between the two (Matt. 22:37). According to Jesus, we miss a crucial component of fulfilling the Great Commandment without it.

Some of us may be the first ones to serve a Thanksgiving meal at a homeless shelter or help a neighbor with a house project. We're all about serving and meeting practical needs. Others of us may have found schoolwork, reading, or big words downright intimidating. Francis Schaeffer provides some encouragement for those of us who find ourselves a bit timid to tackle the big questions and objections, "The ancients were afraid that if they went to the end of the earth they would fall off and be consumed by dragons. But once we understand that Christianity is true to what is there, true to the ultimate environment—the infinite, personal God who is really there—then our minds are freed. We can pursue any question and can be sure that we will not fall off the end of the earth."¹²

How can Schaeffer make such a claim? Because the Christian worldview gives us unrivaled resources to understand the complexities of the world. If the God of the Bible exists, then Christianity provides a helpful grasp not only of how the world came to be but also of the character of the one who brought it into existence. The Christian worldview is the key that frees the mind to properly function rather than wander aimlessly in the intellectual wilderness, grasping for threads of meaning in an uncaused universe with no ultimate point or purpose.

Schaeffer also recognizes the responsibility of contextualizing and communicating the Christian message to each successive generation, "Each generation of the church in each setting has the responsibility of communicating the gospel in understandable terms, considering the language and thought-forms of that setting."¹³

12 Francis A. Schaeffer, *The Complete Works of Francis Schaeffer: A Christian Worldview*, vol. 2, *A Christian View of the Bible as Truth*, 2nd ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1985), 377.

13 Francis A. Schaeffer, *Escape from Reason* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1968), 120. John R. Franke reminds us, "No matter how persuasive,

Successfully contending for truth requires a working knowledge of the prevailing cultural narrative because apologetics is far from a static discipline.¹⁴

Why Apologize?

What do we mean by *apologetics*? The apostle Peter writes, “But in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect” (1 Peter 3:15). Peter’s point is that Christians should prepare themselves to give a reasoned defense to those seeking answers.¹⁵ The Greek word for “defense” is *apologia*; it serves as the root for our English word *apologetics*.¹⁶

Loving our neighbors well includes engaging in robust arguments in order to overturn false belief systems. We do this out of love for the person rather than to egotistically carve another notch in the belt while we listen to Drowning Pool’s “Let the Bodies Hit the Floor.” We could say that apologetics is the art of loving people

beautiful, or successful past theologies or confessions of faith may have been, the church is always faced with the task of confessing the faith in the context of the particular circumstances and challenges in which it is situated.” *The Character of Theology: An Introduction to Its Nature, Task, and Purpose* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 116.

- 14 Kevin Vanhoozer suggests that Christian wisdom is the real aim of evangelical theology (“The Voice and the Actor: A Dramatic Proposal about the Ministry and Ministry of Theology,” in Stackhouse, *Evangelical Futures*, 90). Similarly, Stanley Grenz defines the task of theology as “assist[ing] the people of God in hearing the Spirit’s voice speaking through the text so that we can live as God’s people—as inhabitants of God’s eschatological world—in the present” (“Articulating the Christian Belief-Mosaic: Theological Method after the Demise of Foundationalism,” in Stackhouse, *Evangelical Futures*, 125).
- 15 Thomas R. Schreiner, “1 Peter,” in *CSB Apologetics Study Bible*, ed. Ted Cabal (Nashville: Holman, 2017), 1550.
- 16 Cf. Frederick William Danker, ed., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 117.

by addressing their questions in an intellectually rigorous yet gentle and respectful manner.

Think about it this way: Do you remember the last time you were at odds with another person, and suddenly you realized that you were mistaken? Horror of horrors! They were right and you were wrong. It's that one-liner, story, or "What about?" question that unlocked your mental vault. Immediately, it all came into focus and you realized just how far off base you actually were. Maybe it was a question of fact. Or you may have been blind to the fact that you were acting like a jerk. What can strongly affect our response is *how* the other person carries out the "mic drop" moment. Knowing that you're wrong is a tough road. Walking that road is even more challenging. But if the delivery comes with the additional items of snark, sarcasm, or spite, we will be more tempted to dig in, even when we *know* deep down that we're in the wrong. On the other hand, if the person's attitude exudes gentleness and respect, then we're far more likely to admit what we now realize is the truth.

When I was a teenager, I received a forwarded email. Yes, I had an email address in high school and actually used it. It was in the days of beepers, portable boom boxes, and crazy-expensive cell phones that weighed as much as an engine block. If you wanted to walk around with some tunes, you needed to be able to shoulder press at least 225 pounds. To own or talk on a cell phone, you needed an oil well in your front yard to pay for it. Good times! Anyway, this forwarded email carried "breaking news" that the famous atheist Madalyn Murray O'Hair had faked her death and was now leading a charge to ban all faith-oriented broadcasting. It sounded like something "Straight Outta Stalingrad." I was concerned and immediately forwarded it to several people. There was just one problem: it wasn't true. Even worse, it was a modified form of an older false rumor.¹⁷

17 John Dart, "Rumor of Atheist Airwave Attack Persists: Broadcasting: A False Rumor That Madalyn Murray O'Hair Is Petitioning the FCC to Ban All Religious Programming Is 15 Years Old," *Los Angeles Times*, April 14, 1990, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1990-04-14-ss-1129-story.html>.

One of the guys who received my forwarded email didn't let it slide. He called me out on it like a Marine drill instructor finding a cadet cheating on pushups. He patronized my error of passing along unverified information by giving me something akin to a legal brief that demolished the points of the original message. Then he said I was naive and elaborated on what he perceived to be my cognitive limitations. Guess what? Even though his bedside manner left much to be desired, he was right! Even as I was reading his response, a sinking feeling began to grow in my heart. I knew I was wrong. Dead wrong. I had bought into a 1990s version of fake news and, worse, spread it to others as if it were true. However, because of his tone and tenor, I didn't *want* him to know that he had shown me the error of my ways. Maybe you've been there before. It's when you know they're right and you're wrong, but because their attitude just ticks you off, you don't want to give them the pleasure of knowing they won. Instead of an apology, you want to slap down a "Bye, Felicia!"

I share this story to illustrate the importance of *how* we deliver a reasoned defense of Christianity. Gentleness and respect effectively prepare the emotions and lower the tension so that the mind and volition can absorb compelling arguments for biblical Christianity. Indiscriminately dropping what we self-assuredly label as "truth bombs" without the accompanying spirit of gentleness and respect may get us a high view count on a YouTube clip or two. But it will be largely ineffective in making disciples. Apologetics is far more than dry data dumps, because humans are complex creatures. Yes, we're rational (or at least some of us are some of the time). But we also have these things called feelings. And our tone influences whether people really "hear" us or not.

Tone Matters Because People Matter

For us to love people well, we need to be exclusive in our theology but inclusive in our tone and personal skills. Here's what I mean: we never compromise on the clear teachings of Scripture. For example,

Christians believe that salvation is found only through Jesus Christ, who is the way, the truth, and the life (John 14:6). But we should do our utmost to be winsome, kind, and simply a nice person to be around. We should be willing to, from the heart, welcome every single person from *every* background and belief system, loving them regardless of where they come from or their current lifestyle. Genuine followers of Jesus have a deep conviction that every person has intrinsic value because they've been made in the image of God. Remember that in debates or one-on-one discussions, apologetics and the manner in which we communicate is like the bait of the gospel, and repentance from sin and faith in Jesus are the hook.¹⁸

Here are a couple of guardrails if you find yourself unintentionally steamrolling people rather than effectively making disciples. First, Christians are called to compassionately persuade non-Christians of the truth of the gospel. Second Corinthians 5:11 reads, "Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade others." God calls us to reach out to the struggling rather than strong-arm our neighbors into believing. Persuasiveness includes rigorously appealing to the mind with deep moral sentiments that reflect God's law engraved on the conscience (Rom. 2:14–16). There is no excuse for abrasive or underhanded tactics. Respect is the key here. Responding with a tempered disposition is a sign to others that you've at least graduated Maturity 101 and recognized that being a jerk isn't a spiritual gift.

We have all found ourselves losing respect for a person who shows a pattern of emotionally unhinged reactivity. We may *like* certain people because they are funny, sing well, throw a football with precision, or have some other marketable skill that we find appealing. However, the people we *respect* and genuinely listen to are (or should be) those with character and integrity. I am not excluding entertainers or professional athletes from this category. In fact, the platform of fame can be a tremendous springboard for the advancement of the gospel.

18 Ray Comfort, "I Love Apologetics," Living Waters, February 5, 2018, <https://www.livingwaters.com/i-love-apologetics>.

Here's the point: if people do not respect our character, they will be less prone to be persuaded by our message. Notice how the apostle Paul connects influence within the church with both sound doctrine and strong personal character, "But as for you, teach what accords with sound doctrine. . . . Show yourself in all respects to be a model of good works, and in your teaching show integrity, dignity, and sound speech that cannot be condemned, so that an opponent may be put to shame, having nothing evil to say about us" (Titus 2:1, 7–8). The point is that for people to "hear" and not revile our sound doctrine, our integrity and dignity must be unassailable. Online or in-person invectives and abrasive rhetoric rarely lead others out of false belief systems.

Second, Jesus did not call us to pick fights or seek out controversial matters as gimmicks for self-centered notoriety. The apostle Paul reminds believers, "And the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, correcting his opponents with gentleness. God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth" (2 Tim. 2:24–25). Did you catch it? There it is again: gentleness. Notice how the text fuses rigorous intellectual reasoning and gentleness. This is fathoms apart from theological compromise. We are well within the bounds of orthodoxy to say that correcting *without gentleness* is blatant disobedience to Scripture. Remember to avoid the false dichotomy between doctrinal fidelity and a winsome way of interacting with others. Reason and evidence are incredibly important, but gentleness is how we emotionally prepare the other person to receive those reasons for following that evidence. Emotional preparation effectively precedes epistemological receptivity. Let us strive to be consistent: a people marked by truth, gentleness, and respect (1 Peter 3:15). Let us seek to be led by the Holy Spirit in exuding the strength of gentleness. Our attitude should show some evidence of the peace and fortitude Jesus Christ promises his followers.

Before we go further, let me, as a pastor and professor, acknowledge the shortcomings of some churches and Christians in

treating all people well. The vast majority of professing Christians and Bible-believing churches I have personally been acquainted with genuinely desire to love people. It's just that some of us may not know precisely how. Either way, none of us bat at 100 percent. To be an effective witness for Jesus Christ, we need to realize that there is already a stereotype awaiting us, fashioned in the factory of post-rational contemporary Western culture. Let's look at a few common pitfalls.

Pitfall #1: The Church Curmudgeon

If you've never heard of the Church Curmudgeon Twitter handle (@ChrhcCurmudgeon), prepare to be blessed. You don't need a heavily church background to chuckle at this parody account, or even laugh so hard you snort like a seal. Think Mr. Wilson from *Dennis the Menace* meets grouchy church member. It's a mode of communication that is doctrinally accurate but emotionally abrasive. It's patting oneself on the back for "speaking or preaching the truth" but neglecting to explain the context or the backdrop of a biblical worldview. Such communication likely alienates those with little Bible background. People hear a gruff voice growling, "Get off my lawn!" For Bible-believing Christians, the issue has rarely been one of biblical fidelity, but rather of taking the time and effort to speak in an *articulate* yet biblical way. Articulate treatment is necessary when we handle sensitive and complex challenges. Otherwise, we just make a mess of it. Doctors, engineers, dentists, psychiatrists, and other professionals live in the real world of "precision or catastrophe," and Christians should seek to expand their toolkit to include scalpels and stitches rather than just a collection of sledgehammers.

Pitfall #2: The Compromising "Christian"

A second pitfall is that of the compromising "Christian." Why the quotation marks? Think about sports "greats": Mark McGwire,

Barry Bonds, Tonya Harding, Lance Armstrong, the Communist East German Olympic female swimming team from 1968 to 1980, and the list goes on.¹⁹ Compromise creates a black eye on otherwise notable achievements. All Christians are faced with the temptation to compromise, but Christian leaders are increasingly coming under especially acute pressure. L. Russ Bush noted in 2001, “The challenge to divine authority is growing, and yet among Christians, a spirit of renewal is also growing. It is as if the wheat and the tares are nearing that anticipated final ripening stage, and a divine harvest is near. Intellectual leaders who guide the Christian community through these final days before the harvest must be able to discern the dangers of intellectual compromise. The church has greater spiritual power than all of her enemies combined, but compromise is her Achilles’ heel.”²⁰ Professing Christians who modify clear biblical teaching to fit their own emotional experiences (or sins) often view their new position as theologically enlightened. Thus, they accommodate rather than confront moral erosion. They downplay exclusivist language, cherry-pick Bible verses, and in so doing laud themselves for their so-called open-mindedness. In preaching, this attitude manifests itself by focusing almost exclusively on felt needs and ignoring robust theology at all costs. The Christian message then becomes just another self-help option that appeals primarily to the emotions rather than the intellect. It’s candy for the emotions. It doesn’t heal anything but tastes good for an hour a week, followed by a hard crash of reality.

In a misguided attempt to “love people,” the medicine becomes diluted and exchanged for the temporary placebo effect of believing that “God loves you just as you are.” Instead of asking the hard questions, Scripture becomes subservient to sentiment. An inquiry follows from this: Who is the real you? For Christians, our identity is

19 Todd Boldizar, “The 40 Worst Cheaters in Sports History,” Bleacher Report, December 9, 2010, <https://bleacherreport.com/articles/537712-the-40-worst-cheaters-in-sports-history>.

20 L. Russ Bush, *The Advancement: Keeping the Faith in an Evolutionary Age* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2003), 5.

not in our sins but in our Savior. When we speak of love, we should ask, What is love? and most importantly, What is God's love? God's love confirms our value but confronts our sin. Max Lucado says it this way, "God loves you just the way you are, but he refuses to leave you that way. He wants you to be just like Jesus."²¹ When church leaders allow fear and cultural trends to dictate the church's direction, the end result is that broken people seeking help are left with little more than sugar-coated one-liners, self-improvement tips, and no Redeemer. Instead of directing people to their need for a savior, compromised clergy trip over one another in a mad rush to christen the next culturally accepted sin. Rather than a faith in the God of the ages, whose grace is greater than sin, they're left with an anemic Jesus who doesn't actually save anybody because no one is sinful enough to need a savior. If you're clergy and you find yourself in this description, I encourage you to return to your first love.

Pitfall #3: Being Complicit and Silent

A third pitfall is to be silent and complicit. Consider this the polar opposite of the curmudgeon pitfall. Some Christians don't want to offend others, so they never speak up in a misguided attempt to be tolerant. But silence is not the same as tolerance. Neither does tolerance demand agreement. Forced conformity is tyranny. Tolerance is the willingness to rationally dialogue without resorting to physical violence or any other sort of coercion. Cancel culture is the polar opposite of tolerance. For Christians, there's *unity* in the gospel, but not a cultish conformity.

Equating disagreement and hate is a false dichotomy because disagreement and hate are not synonymous. We can disagree with others and still not hate them. If I'm being honest, I don't even agree with everything that I do. Think about it. All of us sometimes do or think things that we know we shouldn't. A consistent Christian says,

21 Max Lucado, *Just Like Jesus: A Heart Like His* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2012), back cover.

“I love you too much not to speak up and to allow you to continue in a direction that I believe will harm you.” Not to warn a person who is living in sin is a terribly unloving act.²²

Instead, God calls Christians to speak with moral clarity, no matter how unpopular it may seem. Our approach should be molded by confidence in Jesus Christ and compassion toward all persons. Jesus himself provides the framework for acting with genuine compassion. Al Mohler writes, “We must not be silent where the Bible speaks. . . . Love requires us to tell the truth.”²³ We should speak the truth in love, but we cannot fully love without speaking the truth.

At this juncture, I would like to appeal to those who disagree with the Christian message. How far are you willing to take your disagreement with Jesus Christ and his followers? Suppose you support shutting down or canceling opposing voices (religious institutions, Christian schools, Bible-believing churches, etc.) through litigation or public policy. In that case, you’re setting yourself up for that same power to be used to shut down *your* voice if the pendulum of politics and power swings the other way. If we value freedom, we may strongly disagree with one another but still advocate for the liberty to express our respective viewpoints. Anything less becomes a less desirable circumstance in which to live.

Even if you are not a Christian, you should expect Christian leaders to be honest about what Scripture actually teaches and to do so in a way that captures the style, substance, and spirit of the text.²⁴ Concerning smooth-sounding but disingenuous sermons, in the words of Kimberly Wilkins, “Ain’t nobody got time for that.”

22 S. Donald Fortson III and Rollin G. Grams, *Unchanging Witness: The Consistent Christian Teaching on Homosexuality in Scripture and Tradition* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2016), xii.

23 R. Albert Mohler, “My Take: The Bible Condemns a Lot, but Here’s Why We Focus on Homosexuality,” *CNN Belief Blog*, May 21, 2012, <https://religion.blogs.cnn.com/2012/05/21/my-take-the-bible-condemns-a-lot-but-heres-why-we-focus-on-homosexuality>.

24 Steven W. Smith, *Recapturing the Voice of God: Shaping Sermons Like Scripture* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2015).

Tension is not a bad thing. Cults and cult leaders have no internal doctrinal tension. Everything is figured out. If we're willing to hear it out, press through, and allow God to speak to us through his Word, there's tremendous personal growth awaiting us on the other side. In physical exercise, it's often the workouts we want to avoid that have the greatest benefit (#LegDay).

Mark 1:14–15 states, “Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.’” So to whom does Jesus’s command to repent apply? Every single one of us. Can we agree that the gospel cuts all of us somewhere and in some way? There was never a class or group of persons to whom Jesus granted an exception clause on the command to repent. There are no people who need Jesus less than others. Romans 3:22–23 tells us, “For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” The gospel message is clear: we all need what none of us has—a transformed heart that allows us to love and follow God. That’s why we all need Jesus. Saying yes to God requires saying no to yourself.²⁵ Jesus never lowers the cost (Luke 9:23–26).

In conclusion, should we even care about apologetics in the local church or as individual Christians? Absolutely! If people can operate businesses, teach in classrooms, administrate home lives, and operate million-dollar machinery, then they can handle robust apologetics. If you’re a Christian, strive to improve your communication skills. Read more. Get up early or stay up a little later. Learn from critical thinkers to help increase your knowledge. Seek the Holy Spirit’s help in your verbal and written defense of the gospel. Seek to be saturated by the love of God. Pray for your interaction with others to take the posture of Christ-glorifying humility. Deny yourself and exalt Christ. But never ever lower the high call of Jesus Christ. Go “reverse Nike” and just *don’t* do it. Selling out is

25 See Sam Allberry, *Is God Anti-Gay?*, rev. and exp. ed. (London: Good Book Company, 2015).

a losing investment. Be faithful to communicate the good news of Jesus Christ, and let the chips fall where they may. Be courageous. Be teachable. Be humble. But never compromise on the core issues of the faith.