

WHEN *EUANGELION* MET *APOLOGIA*: AN EXAMINATION OF THE MIND'S ROLE IN CONVERSION AND THE VALUE OF APOLOGETICS IN EVANGELISM¹

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abstract

The purpose of this essay is to explore the contributions apologetics can make to the evangelistic task by examining in detail the role the mind plays in conversion. The first section of the essay is concerned with understanding the nature of the gospel message as shared in an evangelistic encounter. The positive response of saving faith and belief, and its counterpart, the negative response of unbelief, are explored in detail. Of particular significance here is the question of whether or not in a gospel encounter a response of unbelief (i.e., "I don't believe in heaven, the Bible," etc.) is primarily intellectual, volitional, both, or something else.

The second part of the essay focuses on how the role of the mind should be factored into developing personal evangelistic strategies. The importance of apologetics is argued for, along with the value of and limitations inherent in the defense of the faith. Some thoughts on effectively evangelizing the so-called postmodern generation conclude the essay.

¹ This essay is a revised and condensed version of my paper by the same name originally presented at the annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, Valley Forge, PA, 17 November 2005.

introduction

Consider the following scenario. A team of dedicated, if less than overly enthusiastic, members from the First Church are out visiting prospects as part of Monday night outreach. The team of two men and one woman has faithfully attended every week, learning the church- endorsed witnessing strategy and subsequently going out to make both evangelistic and ministry visits. The group has been faithful in encouraging those who have visited the church as well as ministering to those members who have not been attending lately. On this particular Monday night, none of the three prospects they received from the church's evangelism pastor are at home. The group remembers that the lesson before visitation tonight focused on how to use a prepared survey door-to-door to gain new prospects for the church, and that such survey work should be attempted on nights like theirs. Mustering up their confidence, the group stops at a recently constructed home in a new subdivision just down from the church.

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After politely knocking on the front door, the team is soon greeted by a thirty-something homeowner dressed in business casual attire. Introductions are exchanged, and permission is secured to conduct the brief survey. The homeowner responds to the first question about why church attendance as a whole is declining by remarking that churches are irrelevant to today's culture. When asked about community needs, he responds that people need to learn to just get along and tolerate each other. The question concerning personal church attendance elicits a sneer as the homeowner recounts being exposed to fundamentalism as a child but as a teenager beginning to doubt Christianity. In college he dismissed organized religion as a sham.

Feeling more apprehensive with each response, the female asks the last survey question, the one designed to lead to a Gospel presentation, "Sir, in your personal opinion, what do you understand does it take for a person to go to heaven?" With a grimace he responds, "Look lady, I don't believe in a heaven or a hell or the Bible or Jesus or any of that bunk!" The team stands back in stunned silence. Weeks of witness training did not prepare them for this encounter, as the follow-up question they were taught to ask a person who gives anything other than the "right" answer is, "I'd like to share with you how the Bible answers this question, if it is all right." Such an approach will not suffice in this situation since the unstated yet presupposed belief in the Scriptures inherent in the presentation has been refuted. The homeowner's answer of unbelief has effectively ended this evangelistic encounter.

Or has it? Could the conversation have continued if the team members would have been more comprehensively trained? Would additional knowledge have

enabled them to overcome this man's answer of unbelief? Is the homeowner's unbelief primarily intellectual, or is it something else? If it is something besides intellectual, how can this team, or for that matter *can* this team, overcome that unbelief and credibly present the Gospel and call for a response? If nothing else, such an episode powerfully demonstrates the limits of personal evangelism as has been traditionally practiced by many evangelicals.

I believe the key to revitalizing personal evangelism and being able to overcome such unbelief lies in integrating apologetics with personal evangelism in such a way that a believer is equipped to not only be able to tell someone *how* to become a Christian, but more importantly, *why* someone should become a Christian. Before exploring what contributions apologetics can make, however, it would be helpful to probe a little deeper into the nature of unbelief.

the nature of unbelief

Consider again the unbelieving homeowner from the opening illustration. He stated clearly in response to the evangelistic presentation's "key question" concerning his personal opinion on getting to heaven that he did not believe in such a place. In addition, he was adamant in denying belief in hell, the Bible, and Jesus. Can one specifically identify the nature of this homeowner's unbelief? For present purposes, the categories of *intellectual* unbelief and *volitional* unbelief will be utilized to ground further analysis and provide a launching point for the discussion of the mind's role in conversion. The two categories are not mutually exclusive; however, indeed both may be present in a person.

intellectual unbelief

Intellectual unbelief may be defined as the mental inability or unwillingness to comprehend and appropriate the factual content of the Gospel. Such unbelief may be manifested in one of two ways. One is what might be termed *active* intellectual unbelief, or the outright and hostile rejection of Christianity's foundational claims. The person manifesting active intellectual unbelief would be the hardened skeptic—the person thoroughly imbibed with a naturalistic worldview who sees the Christian faith as nothing more than mythical charade and Christian leaders as manipulative charlatans. The atheistic philosopher Bertrand Russell would be an easily recognizable example, a person bold enough to pen a tome entitled *Why I Am Not a Christian*.² For Russell, his rejection of Christianity was because of a

² See Bertrand Russell, *Why I Am Not a Christian: And Other Essays on Religion and Related Subjects* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1957).

perceived lack of evidence. In a famous essay, Alvin Plantinga recalled Russell's response when asked how he would answer God should he stand before Him in judgment for his unbelief, "Not enough evidence, God! Not enough evidence!"³ Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud are further prominent examples of persons not merely indifferent, but hostile towards orthodox Christianity in intellectual expression.⁴

On the surface one might surmise that most unbelievers would not fit in the above category; indeed one church growth writer, George Hunter, argues it would be mistaken to think that most unbelievers have rejected Christianity outright on intellectual grounds.⁵ If *active* intellectual unbelief is thus an inaccurate descriptor, it would seem fair to examine the converse manifestation, namely *passive* intellectual unbelief. For persons mired in this mental milieu, there is no driving intellectual hostility—no sense of Christianity as outright fraud or deception. Rather, for the passive intellectual unbeliever, no serious investigation or consideration of the claims of Christ has been undertaken. Ones in such a state may seem intellectually apathetic, lacking convincing or compelling reasons to consider Christianity, though not because of a dearth of evidence. For all intensive purposes theirs is the proverbial state of ignorance.

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In describing this kind of unbelief among secular people, Hunter observes, "Today, most 'educated' people . . . are uninformed of basic Christianity. Many are biblically illiterate; they may not know the difference between the Old Testament and the New Testament, may not recognize the Lord's Prayer or an allusion to the prodigal son."⁶ Not only can the lack of knowledge be problematic, but perhaps even worse is possessing the wrong kind of knowledge or sense perception. Hunter adds, "Indeed, many people are misinformed about essential Christianity. Once they have been exposed to a distorted, diluted form of Christianity, they are inoculated against the real thing (or at least its traditional cultural forms)!"⁷

From the above discussion, it seems worth noting that there are two basic component parts of intellectual unbelief—the possession of cognitive knowledge of Christianity and the mental decision to reject that knowledge either as unintelligible or unpersuasive. From these two factors arise at least six logical possibilities as to the nature of intellectual unbelief. Consider the following two statements:

³ Alvin Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God," in *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God*, ed. Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 17–18.

⁴ Karl Marx famously derided religion as an "opiate of the people" in his "Introduction to a Contribution to a Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right" (1843), while Sigmund Freud said religion was nothing more than an "infantile wish-projection" in his *The Future of an Illusion* (1927, 1961).

⁵ George G. Hunter III, *How to Reach Secular People* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1992), 43.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 44. Hunter describes such persons elsewhere in his work as "ignostics," as opposed to "agnostics."

⁷ *Ibid.*

- (1) *A* possesses accurate cognitive knowledge of Christianity and rejects Christianity as incoherent.

or

- (2) *A* possesses accurate cognitive knowledge of Christianity and rejects Christianity as unconvincing.

In these first two examples of unbelief, the unregenerate person *A* has acquired through some means (personal intellectual study, witnessing encounter, academic course, etc.) accurate knowledge of the content of the Gospel. The problem is not the knowledge itself, but the conclusion drawn from that knowledge—the rejection of Christianity as either incoherent or mentally unpersuasive. As noted before, most unbelievers do not fall into either of these two categories. Consider then the next two propositions:

- (3) *A* possesses inaccurate cognitive knowledge of Christianity and rejects Christianity as incoherent.

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or

- (4) *A* possesses inaccurate cognitive knowledge of Christianity and rejects Christianity as unconvincing.

In this scenario, the common denominator is false mental knowledge about the Gospel. *A* is perhaps someone influenced by the work of the Jesus Seminar,⁸ someone befuddled by the so-called problem of evil,⁹ or something else. The same conclusions from the previous example are also drawn here. Unlike (1) and (2) where true knowledge led to rejection, the present problem involves *A*'s intellectual decision to disbelieve being grounded upon wrong information. Consider the last two possibilities:

- (5) *A* lacks sufficient cognitive knowledge of Christianity and rejects Christianity as incoherent.

or

- (6) *A* lacks sufficient cognitive knowledge of Christianity and rejects Christianity as unconvincing.

In these two examples, the problem does not concern the truth or falsity of the information received, but rather *A*'s mental decision to dismiss Christianity out-of-

⁸ The Jesus Seminar is a group of radical New Testament scholars formed in 1985 to rediscover the so-called "historical Jesus" who in so doing have worked to undermine confidence in the accuracy and reliability of the New Testament Gospels. The Seminar has published several works and has worked to cultivate a positive media image. See Darrell L. Bock, *Jesus According to Scripture: Restoring the Portrait from the Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002) for a helpful rejoinder to the Seminar and a defense of the biblical presentation of Jesus.

⁹ The problem of evil has been often described as the "Achilles heel" of Christianity. In its simplest form, the problem states that if God is all powerful and all loving, how can evil exist? See Ronald H. Nash, "The Problem of Evil," in *To Everyone an Answer: A Case for the Christian Worldview*, ed. Francis J. Beckwith, William Lane Craig, and J. P. Moreland (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 203–23, for a helpful summary of and response to the problem.

hand without due consideration of the Gospel's factual content. The problem here cannot accurately be described as *intellectual* unbelief, because the decision to reject Christianity is not, strictly speaking, a mental one since sufficient knowledge is lacking, at least with respect to Gospel knowledge. Yet there a further possibility exists. Consider, for example, the following two propositions:

- (7) *A* lacks sufficient cognitive knowledge of Christianity, but possesses sufficient cognitive knowledge of Islam, and rejects Christianity as incoherent.

or

- (8) *A* lacks sufficient cognitive knowledge of Christianity, but possesses sufficient cognitive knowledge of Islam, and rejects Christianity as unconvincing.

Now the ground has shifted. No longer does the question merely concern the knowledge given about Christianity. Additional truth claims are introduced and further questions are raised. Can *A*'s rejection of Christianity as either incoherent or unpersuasive stem only from a *lack* of knowledge, or does the inclusion of *other* knowledge now carry the day? Furthermore, from a practical perspective, what difference does this answer make, if any, in how believers should respond and interact with *A*? Does the believer need to simply present the Christian Gospel, or is more work required? In sum, is intellectual unbelief solely based upon the sufficiency and truthfulness of Christian knowledge possessed, or does other knowledge and truth claims play a part in the decision between belief and unbelief? At this juncture, it may be helpful to segue the discussion to the other category of unbelief mentioned earlier, namely *volitional* unbelief.

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volitional unbelief

Volitional unbelief may be defined as the moral inability to internally appropriate the claims of Christ and the Gospel message. Whereas intellectual unbelief corresponds to mental functions, volitional unbelief concerns acts of the will. Volitional unbelief serves as the counterpart to volitional belief or *fiducia*, the act of trust. In this framework the barrier to conversion is not in the mind, but in the will and emotions—the person is *unwilling* to commit his or her life to Christ.

King Agrippa in Acts 26 presents a striking biblical example of volitional unbelief. After appealing to the emperor because of his prisoner status, Paul is brought before Agrippa and asked to state his case. Paul uses the opportunity to present his testimony and preaches the Gospel to Agrippa. Paul's climax is in Acts 26:27, "King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know you believe." Agrippa possessed sufficient Gospel knowledge. His response to that knowledge was,

“Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian” (Acts 26:28, AV). John B. Polhill comments concerning this encounter:

His [Paul’s] direction was clear. If Agrippa believed the prophets and the prophets point to Christ, then why didn’t the king believe that Christ is Messiah? Agrippa sensed Paul’s direction immediately. It put him in an awkward position. On the one hand, he did not want to answer no and deny the prophets. On the other hand, he was not ready to answer yes and have Paul press him for a commitment to Christ. Just exactly how he did respond is anything but clear. One thing is certain—he evaded Paul’s question.¹⁰

The possession of accurate factual knowledge of the Gospel did not translate into trust and commitment for Agrippa. He was unwilling to submit himself to the truth claims of Christ that made a demand upon his life and being. Darkened by sin, the will is disinclined to believe the Gospel and to surrender control to another master. Sincere believers often encounter volitional unbelief in witnessing encounters as verbal Gospel presentations are responded to with, “I’m not ready,” “I don’t need that religious stuff,” or other excuses justifying disbelief.

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the mind’s role in conversion

With the preceding discussion in mind, it may be worth noting some summary thoughts on the role the mind plays in conversion:

(1) *The mind is the receptor of the factual content of the Gospel.* While seemingly self-evident, such a truth cannot be minimized. In a personal witnessing encounter, words are communicated by the evangelist to the ears of the recipient—words that contain the facts of the Gospel and other relevant information. Notwithstanding evangelistic exhortations to “speak to the heart,” the mind remains the real initial contact point for witnessing encounters—the place where the body of knowledge that is able to give spiritual life is first transmitted.

(2) *The mind processes such communication in light of existing knowledge and commitments.* In recent years the concept of worldview has received greater focus and discussion, particularly with reference to postmodernism.¹¹ A worldview may be defined as “the sum of a person’s basic assumptions, held consciously or subconsciously, about life and the nature of reality.”¹² The simplest analogy often given likens a worldview to a set of “glasses” through which every person filters

¹⁰ John B. Polhill, *Acts*, New American Commentary, vol. 26 (Nashville: Broadman, 1992), 508.

¹¹ See David K. Naugle, *Worldview: The History of a Concept* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), for a helpful introduction to the background and development of worldview in recent philosophical thought.

¹² Kenneth D. Boa and Robert M. Bowman Jr., *Faith Has Its Reasons: An Integrative Approach to Defending Christianity* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2001), 111.

truth claims, experiences, and personal commitments.¹³ While scholars debate the precise number of possible worldviews,¹⁴ the concept as a whole has great implications for understanding the mind itself, and hence, its role in conversion. The point cannot be overstated that “it is impossible to think about the world at large or about facts or experiences apart from some worldview.”¹⁵ Indeed, confrontation with the content of the Gospel does not merely offer the lost person spiritual renewal, but a complete reorientation of life that will completely reshape how that person views reality.

(3) *The mind itself is not untainted by sin, nor a self-sufficient entity, but suffers from the effects of inherited sin and stands in need of spiritual transformation.* Often called the “noetic effects of sin,” this doctrine states that the Fall left no part of the human composition unaffected by sin, including the mind.¹⁶ Paul affirms such when he attests that “the god of this age has blinded the minds of the unbelievers so they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God” (2 Cor 4:4). Paul’s discussion of general revelation in Romans 1:18–32 echoes in indicting humanity not for a lack of knowledge, but for the specific rejection of that light.

To summarize, in conversion the mind receives the factual content of the Gospel, and in cooperation with the will and emotions, said *notitia* brings forth *assensus* and *fiducia*. The entirety of which occurs not by human initiative and work, but by the superintendence and grace wrought by God through His Holy Spirit on a person’s entire composition—including mind, will, and emotions—to bring that person to the point of true repentance and faith. Though often overlooked in importance, the mind is an indispensable component in the process of conversion.

the role and value of apologetics

Given the previous summation of the mind’s role, is it sufficient then to say that the task of faithful believers is to simply preach the Gospel and trust God to work? Can it be argued that all a lost person needs is a clear and concise presentation of Christ’s claims as revealed in Scripture, and thus no other labor from the evangelizer? Remember again the introductory illustration of a witnessing

¹³ Norman L. Geisler and Peter Bocchino, *Unshakable Foundations: Contemporary Answers to Crucial Questions about the Christian Faith* (Bloomington, MN: Bethany House, 2001), 55.

¹⁴ Boa and Bowman, *Faith Has Its Reasons*, 111–13.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 148.

¹⁶ For a fuller treatment of this issue see Paul Helm, “John Calvin: The *Sensus Divinitatis*, and the Noetic Effects of Sin,” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 43 (1998): 87–108.

encounter short-circuited by a skeptic's objections. Did he need anything besides the Gospel to receive the forgiveness of sins and eternal life? The answer is both yes and no. No, in the sense that it is the Gospel and the Gospel *alone* that "is God's power for salvation to everyone who believes" (Rom 1:16). But yes, in the sense that the skeptic was not at the point of being able to receive the *notitia* of the Gospel because of his disbelief in heaven, hell, the Bible, and Jesus. The encounter ended here; must it have? What if the team members had been equipped with additional knowledge that could have continued the conversation, perhaps disarming the homeowner's objections and allowing a Gospel presentation to occur? In short, would it have made any difference, in this or any other encounter, if the three believers would have been trained to not only *present* the faith but also to *defend* the truthfulness and credibility of the faith? This chapter obviously contends for an affirmative answer.

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Before arguing for the value of apologetics in evangelism, consider another response the team might have made. They could have responded by simply beginning their outlined presentation and casting aside the homeowner's skepticism as irrelevant to their purpose for being there—to simply share the Gospel. Such an approach, however, would seem to undermine any attempt at authentic relationship with the lost person by communicating an attitude of disdain and an unwillingness to find common ground to help bring that person to faith. In a discussion on the role of the Holy Spirit, apologist and philosopher William Lane Craig comments, "To return to a point mentioned earlier: it is unbalanced and unscriptural to simply preach the gospel *if* the unbeliever has questions or objections. First, it's unbalanced because it assumes the Holy Spirit works only through preaching. But he can work through rational argumentation, too. . . . But second, it's unscriptural to refuse to reason with an unbeliever."¹⁷ He adds, "We should appeal to the head as well as to the heart. If an unbeliever objects that the Bible is unreliable because it is a translation of a translation of a translation, the answer is not to tell him to get right with God. The answer is to explain that we have excellent manuscripts of the Bible in the original Greek and Hebrew languages—and *then* tell him to get right with God!"¹⁸

Craig argues that Scripture precisely commands such an approach in urging believers to "always be ready to give a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you" (1 Pet 3:15). Anticipating critics, he writes, "Of course, it is true that we can never argue anyone into the kingdom of God. Conversion is

¹⁷ William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics*, 3rd ed. (Wheaton: Crossway, 2008), 56, emphasis original.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, emphasis original.

exclusively the role of the Holy Spirit. But the Holy Spirit may use our arguments to draw people to himself.”¹⁹ From this conviction one sees how apologetics can and should serve as an indispensable companion to evangelism.

Fairness demands the rejoinder that not everyone shares such a perspective, particularly the notion of “arguing” about the faith. One practitioner opines, “Apologetics has a questionable reputation among nonaficionados. By definition apologists ‘defend’ the faith. They defeat false ideas. They destroy speculations raised up against the knowledge of God. Those sound like fightin’ words to many people: Circle the wagons. Hoist the drawbridge. Fix bayonets. Load weapons. Ready, aim, fire.”²⁰ He adds, “It’s not surprising, then, that believers and unbelievers alike associate apologetics with conflict. Defenders don’t dialogue. They fight.”²¹ Unfortunately, often because of the unkind way certain apologists have conducted themselves, the work of defending the faith and providing answers for the truth of Christianity has been seen either as irrelevant or counterproductive to the church’s mission. One must nonetheless demarcate the discipline of apologetics itself from the failings of some of its advocates. To not do such is dangerous. One could as easily dismiss (and many do) the legitimacy of the biblical office of evangelist (Eph 4:11–13) because of the often manipulative techniques and rank arrogance displayed by those more interested in statistics than souls and money than ministry. Apologetics has much to contribute to the task of evangelistic ministry and should be evaluated in such light.

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What then precisely *is* apologetics and what value does it have with respect to the task of evangelism? Apologetics as a term derives from the Greek word *apologia*, literally meaning “defense” or “answer,” such as in 1 Peter 3:15. The word in either noun or verb form appears eight times in the New Testament.²² Apologetics as a designation for a separate theological discipline, though, did not arise until near the end of the eighteenth century.²³ In recent times, apologetics as a discipline has come to be understood as having four major objectives: (1) to develop a positive case for Christianity through proof, (2) to defend Christianity against objections and attacks, (3) to refute opposing belief systems, and (4) to persuade people to personally accept and apply Christianity to their lives.²⁴ Sincere

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 57.

²⁰ Gregory P. Koukl, “Tactics: Applying Apologetics to Everyday Life,” In *To Everyone an Answer: A Case for the Christian Worldview*, ed. Francis J. Beckwith, William Lane Craig, and J. P. Moreland (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 47.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Boa and Bowman, *Faith Has Its Reasons*, 17. The eight verses are Acts 22:1; 25:16; 1 Cor 9:3; 2 Cor 7:11; Phil 1:7; 1:16; 2 Tim 4:16; and 1 Pet 3:15.

²³ *Ibid.*, 18.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 21.

and devoted apologists widely differ on *how* these objectives are carried out, but are for the most part united in these fundamental commitments.

Norman Geisler alludes to such objectives in his definition of apologetics, “Apologetics is simply to defend the faith, and thereby destroy arguments and every proud obstacle against the knowledge of God (2 Cor 10:5). It is opening the door, clearing the rubble, and getting rid of the hurdles so people can come to Christ.”²⁵ Such definition removes any idea of self-sufficiency or autonomy for apologetics. Apologetics should not be utilized simply for the sake of “argumentation,” but rather as a means of presentation and persuasion concerning the truth of Christianity.

To reiterate a point made earlier, in no way does apologetics serve as a substitute for the work of the Holy Spirit. Indeed, Craig reminds believers that the work of the Spirit is essential in evangelism and apologetics, “Success in witnessing is simply communicating Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit, and leaving the results to God. Similarly, effectiveness in apologetics is presenting cogent and persuasive arguments for the Gospel in the power of the Holy Spirit, and leaving the results to God.”²⁶ The Spirit is often pleased to use apologetics to break down barriers to faith.

In reflecting again upon the opening illustration, the question remains, what value would apologetics have contributed to the team members’ encounter with the unbelieving homeowner? Three possibilities come to mind. The first asserts that apologetics would have made *absolutely no* impact upon the homeowner. If after his remark of unbelief one of the team members would have responded by offering evidences for the truthfulness and authenticity of the Bible, the homeowner might have responded, “Look, I don’t care how many facts or what evidence you have, I am not going to become a Christian,” and subsequently slammed the door. Apologetics has seemingly contributed nothing to their evangelistic attempt. Such is not the case here, for if anything, the powerful reality and nature of this man’s unbelief has been exposed. In rejecting *any* evidence, his unbelief is revealed as moral, rather than intellectual, in character. The problem resides in the will and the heart, not in the mind. The apologetic itself cannot be cited, for as Craig notes, “. . . unbelief is at root a spiritual, not an intellectual problem. Sometimes an unbeliever will throw up an intellectual smoke screen so that he can avoid personal, existential involvement with the gospel.”²⁷ The concession must be made that even with the inclusion of apologetics, the result of the visit would not have been unaltered.

²⁵ Quoted in Beckwith, *To Everyone an Answer*, 9.

²⁶ Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 60.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 49–50.

The second possibility is that incorporating apologetics would have led to the conversation being *sidetracked* and diverted away from the main purpose, to inquire about this man's spiritual condition. Perhaps this homeowner was well versed in supposed biblical errors and contradictions. When one of the team members offered to provide evidence as to the existence of heaven and authenticity of the Bible, he could have responded, "Proof for the Bible, huh? OK. Tell me who ordered David to take the census, God or Satan? And how about how many angels at the tomb, one or two? And what about these numerical discrepancies here, here, and here? And what about . . .?" The team members could have begun responding to initial objections, but would soon be overwhelmed in trying to answer every critical statement mustered against the Scriptures. In doing so, the visit's original purpose is lost and the team members leave questioning themselves. As noted earlier, apologetics should never be seen as an end in and of itself. The purpose of apologetics is not merely to *win* arguments or display intellectual prowess, but to remove roadblocks to belief. While such an outcome is always possible, from the present writer's vantage point, only a minority of encounters would likely end this way.

The third, and perhaps more likely response, would be that apologetics would have simply allowed the *conversation to continue*. Rather than the homeowner "checkmating" the visitation team, the female could have politely responded, "Sir, I hear what you are saying. I'm glad you don't believe something just because 'the Bible says so.' Every religion has a holy book, and that holy book is always biased toward that religion. If we could talk further, I'd like to show you some evidence that might answer some of your objections, if that would be all right?" In a disarming yet straightforward way, the team members would have made an important segue, from not merely wanting to tell this man *how* to get to heaven and thus become a Christian, but *why* Christianity is true and that he should submit his life to it. Such an approach might be called an *immediate* apologetic, where the evangelist moves to address apologetic questions and then continues through the Gospel presentation.

Where one begins to move into an apologetic discussion is a debated issue. Craig remarks, "Only use rational argumentation *after* sharing the gospel and when the unbeliever still has questions. If you tell him, "God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life," and he says he doesn't believe in God, don't get bogged down *at that point* in trying to prove the existence of God to him."²⁸ Instead, the evangelist should respond, "Well, at this point I'm not trying to convince you that what the Bible says is *true*; I'm just trying to share with you what

²⁸ Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 57, emphasis mine.

the Bible *says*. After I've done that, then perhaps we can come back to whether there are good reasons to believe what it says is true."²⁹ It might be fair to call this approach a *delayed* apologetic, for instead of immediately responding to the skeptic's unbelief, the evangelist sets aside the questions until after completing the Gospel presentation. Craig's motivation shows in his encouragement to the believer, "Remember our primary aim is to present Christ."³⁰

74 While not disagreeing with Craig's perspective that sharing Christ is the central focus of the faithful evangelist, one wonders what would motivate a skeptic to hear the remaining part of a Gospel presentation if he is in denial as to the existence of God, the veracity of Scripture, or the nature of Christ. To use a parallel illustration, would one who did not believe in the use of credit cards be persuaded to continue to listen to a telemarketer's sales pitch about why he or she needs to have the particular credit card being offered if the telemarketer said, "Look, I'm not trying to convince you of the value and usefulness of credit cards as a whole, I'll deal with that later. I'm just trying to tell you what our credit card offer is." It would seem that absent a personal belief in carrying and using credit cards, the listener would have no reason or desire to hear an offer for one. Similarly, it would appear that apart from immediately addressing foundational apologetic issues like those listed above, the conversation might end sooner rather than later.

conclusion

Though the introductory illustration cited throughout the paper is fictional, the reality it portrays must be taken seriously by twenty-first century believers. In his book *The Unchurched Next Door*, Thom S. Rainer stated that five percent of all unchurched persons in America (approximately eight million people at that time) are like the homeowner, with the number on the increase.³¹ He argued that apologetics can be effective in helping believers converse with such persons.³² Twenty-first century believers and churches must recognize that people are starting further and further away from God than they have before. Referencing this fact via a discussion of the Engel Scale,³³ Rainer remarked:

²⁹ Ibid., emphasis original.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Thom S. Rainer, *The Unchurched Next Door: Understanding Faith Stages as Keys to Sharing Your Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 234.

³² Ibid., 237.

³³ The Engel Scale, named for its developer, then Wheaton College Graduate School professor James F. Engel, attempts to portray visually an individual's progress in coming to Christ as Savior and Lord by using a scale measure to chart progressive steps in conversion. Eight steps are posited for moving from unbelief to belief (-8 to -1), with three further steps after conversion (+1 to +3). See Towns, *Evangelism and Church Growth: A Practical Encyclopedia*, 197-98, for an extended discussion of the Engel Scale.

Most churches that have an evangelistic thrust approach lost persons as if they are a “-4” [Positive attitude toward the gospel] or “-3” [Personal problem recognition] on the Engel scale. This would have been a fair assumption three decades ago. Today most of the “new pagans” would be a “-8” [Awareness of a supreme being, but no effective knowledge of the gospel] or a “-7” [Initial awareness of the gospel] on the scale. If we are to be effective evangelists, we must recognize that most people are a lot further from the cross than they were a few decades earlier.³⁴

The assumptions that traditionally have been made about unregenerate persons can no longer be safely taken for granted. Further, the assumptions that have been made by many churches and Christian leaders in how to most effectively train believers to evangelize the lost must be reexamined. Unfortunately, a greater emphasis has been placed far too often upon learning and memorizing a particular approach or “script,” rather than equipping disciples to effectively engage unbelievers. As one Christian writer put it, “The communicator, if he or she is to be heard, must begin with the listener where the listener is, and not where the evangelist thinks he or she ought to be.”³⁵

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Effective evangelism today will find a great ally and tremendous resource in biblical apologetics. Indeed, training in apologetics should be as central for the discipleship and spiritual formation of believers as witness training. What form that apologetic takes will be determined by the context the believer is faced with, as every situation and every encounter is unique. May the Lord be pleased to use apologetics in evangelism to keep the conversations going, and by the power of his Spirit, to bring many persons into His kingdom.

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³⁴ Thom S. Rainer, *The Book of Church Growth: History, Theology, and Principles* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1993), 219.

³⁵ Hunter, *Secular People*, 12.