

Apologetics Training - Advice to Christian Apologists Part 2

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SUMMARY

For those feeling called to an apologetics ministry, Dr. Craig continues his lecture offering advice to help students in that pursuit. In this second installment, he explains how societal ideas are formed primarily within the university and why apologists can have more impact when they've earned a doctorate in a specialized field of study. He then concludes with some very practical advice on why anyone called to apologetics ministry must strive to develop a humble spirit and a true Christian character.

APOLOGETICS TRAINING - ADVICE TO CHRISTIAN APOLOGISTS PART 2

2. Apologetics ministry - Earn a doctorate in your area of specialization.

This may not come as welcome advice to some of you. But popular apologetics alone will not do the job. Popular apologetics may sway the uneducated, but it will not change the prevailing thought structures of society.

In order to shape the thought structures of society so as to foster a cultural milieu that allows a place for the Christian worldview as an intellectually viable option, we must influence the university. I say this because the single most important institution shaping Western culture is the university. It is at the university that our future political leaders, our journalists, our lawyers, our teachers, our business executives, our artists, will be trained. It is at the university that they will formulate or, more likely, simply absorb the worldview that will shape their lives. And since these are the opinion-makers and leaders who shape our culture, the worldview that they imbibe at the university will be the one that shapes our culture. If we change the university, we change our culture through those who shape culture. If the Christian worldview can be restored to a place of prominence and respect at the university, it will have a leavening effect throughout society.

But that implies that popular-level apologetics aimed at the masses will not do the job. Only scholarly level apologetics aimed at specialists in the various academic disciplines will be capable of changing the university and so ensuring lasting cultural change. Machen observed that many people in his day "would have the seminaries combat error as it is taught by its popular exponents" instead of confusing students "with a lot of German names unknown outside the walls of the university." But, Machen insisted, the scholarly method of procedure

. . . is based simply upon a profound belief in the pervasiveness of ideas. What is to-day matter of academic speculation begins to-morrow to move armies and pull down empires. In that second stage, it has gone too far to be combated; the time to stop it was when it was still a matter of impassionate debate. So as Christians we should try to mould the thought of the world in such a way as to make the acceptance of Christianity something more than a logical absurdity. [1]

Thus, paradoxically, the most effective books in apologetics will not be books on apologetics at all. Rather they will be scholarly monographs in areas of specialized study. I brought along with me a few of the best books I know of in Christian apologetics. They might surprise some of you: Alvin Plantinga's *The Nature of Necessity* , Robert Gundry's commentary on the Gospel of Mark, Colin Hemer's *The Book of Acts in the Setting of Hellenistic History* , William Dembski's *The Design Inference* , Thomas Morris's *The Logic of God Incarnate* . These are the sort of books that will be studied and discussed for years to come in scholarly circles and classrooms and will shape the thinking of future generations. They will provide the basis of popularizations like Lee Strobel's excellent apologetic books for laymen and thus influence even the masses.

In order to change the culture, we must change the university. In order to change the university, we must do scholarly apologetics. In order to do scholarly apologetics, we must earn doctorates. It's that simple.

Moreover - to speak now on a personal level - , you will be amazed at the doors of opportunity that will open to you if you have a doctorate. I noticed this right away after completing my degrees. We were doing a speaking tour of British universities, and at the University of Nottingham I had the opportunity to speak in a classroom. The professor introduced me by saying, "Dr. Craig studied under John Hick at the University of Birmingham and under Wolfhart Pannenberg at the University of Munich." He paused and then said, "These are great names, and we are privileged to have Dr. Craig address our class." I smiled inside and said, "Thank you, Lord!" I was quite happy to ride my mentors' coattails to give a defense of Christian theism.

Just this last month Jan and I were in China where I spoke as a guest of the Philosophy Department at a major university. I presented a moral argument for theism, and, in response to student questions, I was even able to share my personal testimony of how I came to faith in Christ. When I came to the part where I describe how I finally yielded my life to Christ, the students actually broke into applause! It was sobering afterwards to reflect that such an extraordinary opportunity is not open to traditional missionaries but is wide open to Christians who have the requisite academic credentials.

Having a doctorate will open doors of ministry for you that would otherwise remain closed. I have good friends who are Christian apologists who early on chose not to pursue doctoral study and whose apologetics ministries are inhibited as a result. The sorts of venues I just described are closed to them, both at home and abroad. Earning a doctorate will expand the horizons of your ministry.

It will not be easy. The power structures in certain fields are often deeply anti-Christian. Students who are evangelical Christians may be weeded out by denying them degrees or professorships. There will be, and already have been, victims of anti-Christian discrimination in the process. But over time, more and more of us will successfully get through. Graduate programs in philosophy are awash with Christian students gradually working their way up through the system. Talbot School of

Theology now has the largest Master of Arts program in philosophy at any English speaking institution. I and my colleagues at Talbot are sometimes approached by philosophers at secular universities actually inviting us to send some of our graduates to do doctoral work with them. This can happen in other fields as well. As the old guard dies off and young Christian scholars are hired in their places, the face of the university will change. What Thomas Kuhn said of scientific revolutions is also true of Christian revolutions: they proceed one funeral at a time.

Now I realize that for some of you, you may have a different calling. In your case, especially for those of you who are pastors, I'd encourage you to be on the lookout for students whom you can direct into doctoral programs. On the other hand, if you're under 35, doctoral studies are still a realistic option which I'd encourage you to explore. The keys for success will be, first, choosing a dissertation topic which you're passionate about, and, second, finding a mentor at a secular university who is at least sympathetic with your dissertation topic. You may have to write on a more neutral topic than you'd like in order not to arouse opposition to your candidacy. For example, my doctoral thesis on the resurrection of Jesus was primarily a history of historical apologetics for the resurrection. Once I had the degree safely in hand, then I published as a second volume the hundreds of pages I had written on my own historical apologetic for the resurrection.

If you feel called to an apologetics ministry, then, while I cannot presume to know God's will for you, I would urge you to consider seriously completing doctoral studies. It will deepen and enrich your life, open doors of ministry for you, and greatly increase your impact for the Kingdom.

3. Apologetics ministry - Be mindful of your personal, spiritual formation.

3. *Be mindful of your personal, spiritual formation* . In the end the most important thing is not what you do, but who you are. I'm not always enthusiastic when I meet a student who tells me that he wants to become a Christian apologist. One sometimes detects that what the student really wants is the limelight and the glory. Or there may be a spirit of argumentativeness or arrogance about him. Or perhaps a craving for the affirmation of others to offset a personal sense of inferiority. Of course, we are all broken people, and none of us has motives that are wholly pure. But it is vitally important that, as a public representative of Christ, the Christian apologist be a person who is filled with the Holy Spirit and walking humbly with God.

Apologetics is inherently an agonistic discipline. That is to say, it is combative, involving a struggle of ideas. It tends to promote selfish ambition, arrogance, and competitiveness. But this is not the kind of wisdom which God treasures. On the contrary He calls it demonic. Look at James 3.13-15 : "Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good life let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom. But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth. This wisdom is not such as comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish." Notice the progression: "earthly, unspiritual, devilish." This sort of worldly, demonic wisdom is personally destructive, both to you and to others about you.

I think that pride is perhaps the most dangerous and insidious enemy that the Christian apologist will face. We may do good scholarly work, but if we are filled with vain glory, we shall undermine what we say by the way we are. Pride screams at people and pushes them away. It will undercut the message that we bring.

What, then, can we do to combat this attitude? First, we need to understand the primacy of love over knowledge in God's economy. Paul wrote, "Knowledge puffs up; but love builds up. If anyone thinks that he knows something, he does not yet know as he ought to know" (1 Cor. 8.1b-3). The simplest child of God who lives in love is wiser in God's sight than all the Bertrand Russells the world has seen. If we lack love, than all our knowledge makes us just big, inflated intellectual windbags who are actually ignorant of what matters most.

Second, we need to realize the feebleness of our own intellectual attainments. Socrates said that he was the wisest man in Athens because he knew that he knew nothing. And similarly, here, Paul says, "If anyone thinks that he knows something, he does not yet know as he ought to know." We need to reflect on the feebleness and finitude of our knowledge. When we do, we realize how stupid it is to be proud. The more we learn, the more we realize how desperately little we know. We should be like Newton, who reflecting on the success of his great Principia, wrote, I do not know what I may appear to the world; but to myself I seem to have been only like a boy, playing on the sea-shore, and diverting myself, in now and then finding a smoother pebble or prettier shell than ordinary whilst the great ocean of truth lay all undiscovered before me. Finally, third, we should heed the words of the medieval theologian Hugh of St. Victor, when he wrote,

Now the beginning of [study] is humility. Although the lessons of humility are many, the three which follow are of especial importance for the student: first, that he hold no knowledge and no writing in contempt; second, that he blush to learn from no man; and third, that when he has attained learning himself, he not look down upon everyone else.

As Christians serving in apologetics ministry, we are called to be servants of the Church and should comport ourselves as such.

In general, we as Christian apologists are called to the same holiness of life that all disciples of Christ are called to. It is vitally important that, as servants of Christ, each of us be a person who goes often to his knees to spend time with God, who depends daily on the filling of the Holy Spirit to live a life pleasing and acceptable to God. We must seek Christ's glory, not our own. We must be open to criticism and willing to see our own shortcomings, to learn from our critics. We must not place our career or studies ahead of our family, but rather be prepared to give up our studies and even our career if necessary for the sake of those we love. We must guard against sin, including sexual sin, in thought as well as deed, so as not to dishonor Christ. We must learn what it means, not to merely *do* things for God, but to be the person God wants us to be.

Unless we learn to be who God wants us to be, all our vaunted achievements will be as wood, hay, and stubble. Our spiritual formation is therefore as vitally important as our intellectual formation as Christian apologists.

In conclusion, then, if God is calling you to a Christian apologetics ministry, my advice to you is to select some area in which to specialize, to earn a doctorate in your area of specialization, and to mind your personal, spiritual formation. May God raise up a new generation of Christian apologists committed to His truth, to excellence in their work, and living out the life of Christ, so that the lives of millions may be touched and transformed as a result!

Footnotes:

[1] J. Gresham Machen, "Christianity and Culture," *Princeton Theological Review* 11 (1913): 6.