

Understanding Christian Apologetics

Lesson 3: The Art of Argument

I. Arguing Is Not Quarreling (see 2 Tim. 2:24-26)

- A. In a quarrel, the parties involved get angry, raise their voices, interrupt, intimidate, etc.
1. If we resort to such tactics, it gives the impression that our ideas are weak
 2. Quarreling puts people on the defensive and rarely produces anything good
 3. "Always make it your goal to keep your conversations cordial. Sometimes that will not be possible... Just make sure it's your ideas that offend and not you, that your beliefs cause the dispute and not your behavior."¹
- B. In an argument, you are "contending in a principled way for something that really matters"²
1. Not a hostile confrontation, but an attempt to give credibility to the biblical message
 2. Arguments are vital for clarifying our thinking and protecting us from error
 3. Beware of those who try to squash disagreement by labeling those who express opposing views as mean-spirited; this approach silences debate
 4. "We need to cultivate the ability to [express disagreement] with civility and not take opposition personally."³

¹ Gregory Koukl, *Tactics: A Game Plan for Discussing Your Christian Convictions*, 31.

² Koukl, 31.

³ Koukl, 34.

II. The Use of Arguments in Apologetics

- A. Only God can bring a sinner to saving faith in Christ (see Jn. 6:33)
 - 1. While we cannot argue people into the kingdom, the Holy Spirit can use our arguments to persuade people to believe
 - 2. The Lord worked through the apostle Paul's reasonable arguments to persuade some to believe (see Acts 17:2-4); Paul appealed to historical events that were matters of public knowledge (see Acts 25:19; 26:26)
 - 3. Remember that Jesus' sheep will, in God's time, respond to the gospel in faith (see Jn. 10:27-28); be attentive to how people respond to your arguments; spend your time on those who are willing to consider the points you make

- B. Remember the vital role of your own godly character in apologetics
 - 1. Bold confidence (Eph. 6:19-20)
 - 2. Gentleness and respect (1 Pet. 3:15)
 - 3. Aristotle said that "the personal goodness revealed by the speaker... may almost be called the most effective means of persuasion he possesses."⁴

- C. Look for ways to get the person with whom you are speaking to identify with what you are saying
 - 1. Build a bridge between the gospel and something that they already accept that they have borrowed from the Christian position
 - 2. In Acts 17:28, Paul cites pagan poets known to his audience to advance his argument

⁴ Cited in K. Scott Oliphint, *Covenantal Apologetics*, 144.

- D. Base your arguments upon the truth that God has revealed in his Word, since this is our infallible authority
- E. Keep your goals modest
 - 1. Focus simply on trying to give the person something to think about
 - 2. “All I want to do is put a stone in someone’s shoe. I want to give him something worth thinking about, something he can’t ignore because it continues to poke at him in a good way... I encourage you to consider the strategy I use when God opens a door of opportunity for me. I pray for wisdom, then ask myself this: What one thing can I say in this circumstance, what one question can I ask, what seed can I plant that will get the other person thinking?”⁵
 - 3. Remember that some sow and others reap, and that the Spirit often takes time to persuade a person to embrace Christ
- F. See the appendix “Twenty Principles of Effective Argumentation” on pp. 5-8

⁵ Koukl, 38, 40.

TWENTY PRINCIPLES OF EFFECTIVE ARGUMENTATION

Compiled by Dr. David F. Coffin, Jr.⁶

BEFORE YOU BEGIN

1. *Principle of Humility*—keep firmly in mind that, (a) you don't know everything; (b) you have been wrong before; and (c) you may learn something. One of the best ways of testing both your understanding of, and the truth of, your beliefs is to plunge with equal measures of boldness, humility, and openness into the fires of controversy.
2. *Judgment of Charity*—assume the best and most honorable motives on the part of your opponent.
3. *Gerstner's Law*—do not debate a point of contention until you can state your opponent's position to his satisfaction.
4. *Seek Common Ground*—attempt to establish common ground with your opponent as a starting point for the discussion.

THE CONFLICT JOINED

5. *Socratic Principle*—follow the argument where it leads; the point is not merely to defend “our side,” but to attempt to establish the truth of the matter.
6. *Status Verbum (define terms)*—establish the meaning and use of the terms in the argument, especially those essential to the point at issue, thus avoiding the useless *logomachy (arguing about words)*.

⁶ Dr. Coffin is the pastor of New Hope Presbyterian Church (PCA) in Fairfax, VA.

7. *Status Quæstionis (define the question)*—constantly work to establish and clarify the statement of the question at issue: what it is and what it is not.
8. *Charitable Interpretation*—always attempt to understand and restate your opponent’s arguments in the best possible light until/ unless he specifically denies such interpretation.
9. *Objective Stance*—avoid charging *your opponent* with various errors; rather charge the *arguments*. If your opponent is really “irrational,” you look rather foolish in bothering to discuss the matter with him.
10. *Public Confession*—show your willingness to admit error, ignorance, or misunderstanding; not only is this proper in itself, but it will create an atmosphere where your opponent will feel free to do the same.
11. *Freudian Fallacy*—don’t confuse grounds with motives; if an argument is offered, it must be dealt with, as an argument, regardless of the supposed motivation for offering it.

AS YOU PROCEED

12. *Terrier Principle*—never leave a point at issue, once established, until it is settled, unless the movement brings one closer to a foundational question.
13. *Premise by Premise Method*—don’t be afraid to interrupt (with permission), or be interrupted, for the purpose of clarifying or questioning a premise in the chain of an argument.
14. *Hypothetical Pause*—don’t be afraid to propose or accept, temporarily, a premise not agreed upon, for the purpose of exploring its implications.

15. “*Wouldn’t you say . . . ?*” *Method*—pose questions for joint analysis; don’t constantly make “authoritative” pronouncements. Pontification is only useful to the pontiff.
16. “*Let’s think about that*” *Tactic*—don’t merely respond to an assertion with a counter-assertion, but attempt to “think through” the premises supporting (or the implications of) the assertion set forth by your opponent.
17. *The Evidential Wall*—avoid the useless frustration of continuing to debate disputed evidence not immediately verifiable; be content to agree to disagree until the required confirmation can be obtained.
18. *Name the beast*—be familiar enough with the formal and informal fallacies to name and explain the error you believe your opponent to have made.

ENDING THE DISCUSSION

19. *Legitimate Means of Escape*—though the point of discussion is to establish your conclusion (so long as you remain persuaded it is correct), leave room for legitimate dissent and further reflection; very few arguments are immediately persuasive and thus it is essential to conclude with your opponent “feeling” good enough about the discussion to give it further thought. “Let all things (even arguments!) be done for edification.”
20. *Fontes Solutionum (sources of explanation)*—after you have demonstrated by argument that your opponent’s view is in error, try to show how or why your opponent has gone wrong in his thinking, taking into account matters ranging beyond the argument itself, e. g., motives, otherwise legitimate concerns, experiences, prejudices, etc.

POSTMORTEM or *Why didn’t I think of that at the time?*

It is a common occurrence for many that the best argument and riposte are discovered only in the aftermath of the discussion as the dust begins to settle. The problem is that many of us fail to learn from this useful mental review because it takes place somewhat haphazardly. Thus the key is to consciously review the discussion, making notes if necessary, in order to use the insights gained as the basis for further study and reflection.

FOR FURTHER READING

- Carson, D.A. *Exegetical Fallacies*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1984.
- Hoover, A.J. *Don't You Believe It! Poking Holes in Faulty Logic*. Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1982.
- Moreland, J.P. *Love Your God with All Your Mind*. Colorado Springs, CO: Navpress Publishing Group, 1997.
- Sire, James W. *Scripture Twisting: 20 Ways the Cults Misread the Bible*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1980.
- Stott, John R. W. *Your Mind Matters: The Place of the Mind in the Christian Life*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1972.