

Review: The Methods of Apologetics & Evangelism

1. **Western society is no longer ‘Christendom,’ but a “post-Christian” mission field.**
 - No longer assume “background knowledge” of Bible, nor expect respectful hearing.
 - Christianity no longer valued as “social glue” of society, but a threat to social progress.
 - This challenges us in how we: 1) *conduct* evangelism, 2) *communicate* the gospel.
 - Question: as situation looks increasingly like early church, can we learn from them?
2. **The apostles utilized the socially acceptable methods of their day.**
 - Whenever possible, they began in the synagogues – where they could expect to find a knowledge of the OT, and might even be invited to speak (Acts 13:14-15).
 - Where no synagogue existed, or there were other forums besides the synagogue, they also made use of these. Yet even Paul’s preaching and reasoning “in the marketplace” in Athens was considered socially acceptable in the 1st century – and it ended up earning him an invitation to speak at the Areopagus (Acts 17:19-21).
 - Sum: knowing that they carried an offensive message, the apostles chose *venues and opportunities* that were the most natural and least offensive.
3. **During the key period of Christianity’s expansion (AD 64-313), most evangelism did not happen via special events or even public worship services.**
 - Due to persecution during this time, churches closed their doors to outsiders.
 - Only catechumens, baptized members, or credentialed visitors were welcome.
4. **During this time, witness centered not on a church building, but in Christian homes.**
 - Hospitality and informal conversation were key means of evangelism.
 - Christians also met for worship in home-based groups in residential areas.
 - By the 2nd century, skeptics were complaining “it was in private houses that the workers and cobblers, the laundry workers and the yokels... did their proselytizing.”¹
5. **During this time, the chief witnesses were not famous leaders, but ordinary, anonymous Christians.** This began even in the NT period (Acts 8:3-4, 1 Pet. 3:15).
6. **During this time, the most powerful witness came through relationships and lifestyle.**
 - Christians spread their faith through ordinary relationships in home and at work.
 - Christians also made an impression through their patience in business, sexual purity, mentoring internationals, and especially their diaconal care – even for non-Christians.
7. Sum: **Christian witness is most effective not through church-sponsored or public events, but through ordinary life, lived intentionally in such a way that we will cultivate natural opportunities to share supernatural news!**

¹ Michael Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church*, revised ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 318.

Contextualization: How We Communicate in Apologetics & Evangelism

I. Vikings, Ducks, and Spam...

1. Let's begin with the following **thought experiment**:

Imagine you are a Christian monk or nun living in Rome around AD 600. You've been chosen to be part of a new missionary expedition to a vast pagan island in the north – Britain. So you accompany your leader, Abbot Augustine, onto the boat and set sail...

When you arrive and get off the boat, in what is today southeast England, you immediately run into some of the Anglo-Saxon natives – and some of them can speak your language! On seeing you, they ask, “What are you here for?”

In such a missionary context, how would you reply?

- Would you launch into a detailed explanation of the “Five Points of Augustinianism?” (John Calvin is still about 1,000 years in the future...)
- Would you begin immediately interrogating them about whether they've ever sinned?

2. How much of Christian communication toward non-Christians is clear?

The children's book *Duck for President*² is about a Duck who campaigns successively and successfully for farmer, governor, and finally president. As he is on the campaign trail, the story repeatedly says, “He gave speeches only other ducks could understand.”

This is a real issue – not just in politics, but also in apologetics and evangelism:

- Are our conversations, literature, sermons, websites understandable to non-Christians?
- **“In Christendom, when ‘everyone was a Christian,’ it was perhaps useful for a church to define itself primarily in contrast with other churches. Today, however, it is much more illuminating and helpful for a church to define itself in relationship to the values of the secular culture.”**³

On a mission field... notions of biblical truth are either lacking or seriously flawed. we cannot assume people understand even basic Christian ideas.

1st issue – clarity: *Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving. At the same time, pray also for us, that God may open to us a door for the word, to declare the mystery of Christ, on account of which I am in prison – that I may make it clear, which is how I ought to speak. (Colossians 4:2-4)*

² Doreen Cronin, *Duck for President* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004).

³ Timothy Keller, *Center Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 260.

3. How much Christian communication toward non-Christians actually connects?

Several times each week – sometimes several times a day – I get telephone calls from my good friend, “Scam Likely.” (I like to answer in Chinese, which can be fun if there is actually a live person on the other end.) But live person or not, the pattern is the same: get my attention, and then launch into a pre-recorded script...

This is also a real issue – not just in telemarketing, but in apologetics and evangelism:

- How much of modern gospel communication is like ‘spam’ or “scam likely”?
- Is the gospel simply a product to market? Are people simply numbers to dial?
- Is it any wonder they “hang up”?

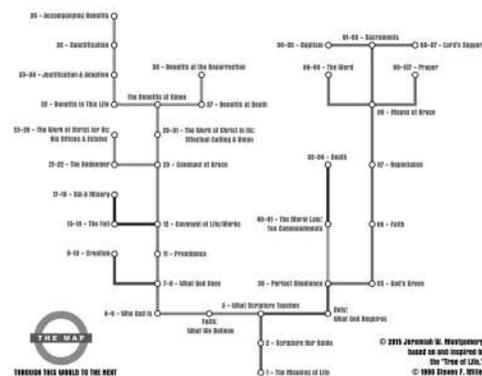
2nd issue – connection: *Walk in wisdom toward outsiders, making the best use of the time. Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person. (Colossians 4:5-6)*

ESV Study Bible: “This statement echoes the teaching of Jesus when he called his disciples to be ‘the salt of the earth’ (Matt. 5:13). When applied to conversation, the metaphor suggests speaking in an interesting, stimulating, and wise way.”

II. Gospel Communication – Make it Clear

4. Although Reformed churches *today* can sometimes be very guilty of giving “speeches only other ducks could understand,” the *early Reformed churches produced special tools for making the gospel clear* – such as the *Westminster Shorter Catechism (WSC)*:

- WSC is a unified, logical tree!
- It tells us *who God is* (#4-6) before telling us *what God did* (#7-38).
- When it comes to theological ideas such as ‘justification,’ ‘adoption,’ and ‘sanctification,’ it gives us the *definitions* (#33-35) before it gives us the *applications* (#36-38).



5. **Clarity does not mean *discarding* theological terms or important ideas, but rather *defining* them.** When you use the big words, always also give a concise, simple definition:

- “Covenant of Grace” = “God’s rescue plan”
- “Means of Grace” = “the things God uses to work in us”
- “Regulative Principle” = “God tells us how to worship him”

6. This work of ‘translating’ our theology from ‘Christianese’ into the language of those with whom we are speaking helps both them and us:

“You must translate every bit of your Theology into the vernacular. This is very troublesome and it means you can say very little in half an hour, but it is essential. It is also of the greatest service to your own thought. I have come to the conviction that if you cannot translate your thoughts into uneducated language, then your thoughts were confused. Power to translate is the test of having really understood one's own meaning.”⁴

Remember: Precise terms mean precisely nothing unless people know precisely what they mean! Theological precision is intended to make things more clear, not more abstract!

III. Gospel Communication – Make it Connect

7. In addition to helping people understand *what the truth means*, effective gospel communication also shows them *why it matters*:

“You have to show that this is not some academic or theoretical matter which may be of interest to people who take up that particular hobby, as others take up crossword puzzles or something of that type. You are to show that this message is vitally important for them, and they must listen with the whole of their being, because this really is going to help them to live.”⁵

Ask yourself... *Why does this aspect of the gospel matter to a child – or a skeptic? How would you explain it to each of them?*

“Today Testimony”: *Can you explain why Jesus matters to you, in real life today, without using any Christianese?*

8. To do this well, we must show *sympathy* to the people and place in which we live:

“Express people’s hopes, objections, fears, and beliefs so well that they feel as though they could not express them better themselves... Christianity demands that we have enough compassion to learn the questions of our generation... Immerse yourself in the questions, hopes, and beliefs of the culture so that you can give a biblical, gospel-centered response...”⁶

Example: in 2014 I was in FL giving a talk to a room full of church-planters and evangelists. I began by quoting a line from *The LEGO Movie* – the #4 movie of that year, and rated PG. But not everybody had seen it...

⁴ C.S. Lewis, “Christian Apologetics” in *God in the Dock* (reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 98.

⁵ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching and Preachers* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1972), 76.

⁶ Keller, *Center Church*, 273.

Give “people the Bible's answers, which they may not want at all to hear, to questions about life that people in their particular time and place are asking, in languages and forms they can comprehend, and through appeals and arguments with force they can feel, even if they reject them.”⁷

Point: if we want to help others feel the force of gospel conviction and comfort, we must understand the ideas and stories that resonate with them!

Examples: when Paul was in the synagogue, he quoted from the OT (Acts 13)
 when in pagan Lystra, he used natural revelation (Acts 14:15-17)
 when in sophisticated Athens, he made use of secular authors (Acts 17:28)

9. **Part of effective, gospel communication is also showing respect.** This has two facets:

a. First, **respect *the pace of the Holy Spirit’s work in their lives***:

I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth... (Jn. 16:12-13)

But I, brothers, could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it. And even now you are not yet ready... (1 Cor 3:1-2)

Research suggests that there are approximately five stages/thresholds experienced by postmodern people who become Christians.⁸

Stage	Our Goal	What’s Needed/Useful
Trust a Christian	Destroy the “glass wall”	Establish relationship
Become Curious	Provoke curiosity	Good questions & stories
Open to Change (<u>Hardest stage!</u>)	Worldview exchange / Reframe their story within God’s	Prayer, patience, gracious/gentle confrontation.
Seek after God	“What if... me?” / Personalize the gospel	Use Scripture to help them face questions & find answers.
Enter the Kingdom	Surrender to Jesus Christ	Confession of faith, visible church, worship, discipleship.

b. Second, **respect *the person’s dignity*** (Mat. 7:12; cf. 1 Pet. 3:15).

Remember: **the “golden rule” is not suspended for apologetics or evangelism!**

When in doubt if it’s okay to press further...

1) **Ask permission:** “Do you mind if I ask you...?”

2) **Give permission:** “You may think this is crazy or offensive...”

⁷ Keller, *Center Church*, 89.

⁸ Don Everts and Doug Schaupp, *I Once Was Lost* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2008).

IV. Gospel Communication – Making it Live (Activation)

1. *Things to remember:*⁹

- a. **True evangelism is a way of living characterized by being “friendly to people, liking people, and talking to people” about Jesus.** Even the most introverted among us talk about what we love! Evangelism is about loving Jesus, loving people, and sharing the former with the latter. It is not an impersonal, invasive program.
- b. **Most of us don’t need new contacts.** Rather, we need simply to leverage our many existing contacts of family, friends, classmates, and/or coworkers.
- c. **People are souls.** In order to tell people about Jesus, we must learn to see people not as *landscape* (part of the background to my life) or as *machines* (those who serve me), but as souls with everlasting destinies.
- d. **Love is not for the sake of evangelism; evangelism is for the sake of love.** We don’t stop loving people if they reject the gospel. If they reject the gospel, they cannot be our brother or sister – but they are still our neighbor (Mat. 27:39).

2. *Things to do:*¹⁰

- a. **Pray expectantly.** “Expect great things from God. Attempt great things for God.”
- b. **Live intentionally.** “Go out of your way to interact with people... I don’t have to go halfway around the world to have an international ministry – all I have to do is walk inside to pay for my gas.”
- c. **Be friendly and interested.** “You’ll come across dozens of people each day you naturally have interaction with. It isn’t about putting more people into your life; it’s about genuinely seeing more of the people that are part of your everyday routine – who are, for most of us, no more than scenery and sometimes intrusions.”
- d. **Cultivate relationships.** According to a 2017 study, 88% of people who’ve had a life-changing spiritual conversation had it with somebody they knew well.¹¹
- e. **Expel fear of man with confidence in God.** Replace “What will they think?” with “What might God do?” Remember Jesus is always with us in evangelism (Heb. 13:5)!
- f. **Take courage.** Courage is not the absence of fear; it is pressing on despite fear. When we feel weak, we can ask for strength and still decide to speak.
- g. **Learn good questions.** “If someone wanted to talk to you about God, how would you like to be approached?” “What do you think make for a happy life? Are you winning or losing?” “If you only had 6 months to live, what would you do? Why?” “Does the thought of death scare you?”

⁹ The quote in 1.a is from Rev. Eric Watkins. The ideas in 1.b-c and 2.d come from Rev. Eric Hausler.

¹⁰ The quote in 2a is from William Carey. The quotes in 2.b-c are from John S. Leonard, *Get Real: Sharing Your Everyday Faith Every Day* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2013), 113, 112. The questions under 2.g are from Doug Pollock, *God Space* (Loveland, CO: Group, 2009), 92, 108-112.

¹¹ Don Everts, *The Reluctant Witness* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2019).