

Summary: Apologetics for Evangelism

1. No human soul is spiritually neutral. All of us serve either Christ or ourselves, our Creator or some creature (2 Cor. 5:15, Rom. 1:25). Everybody has a “chief end” – a functional god.
2. Unbelief is never a matter of lack of evidence. The truth about God’s power, divinity, morality, and eternity is evident to all people in the created order, in moral conscience, and in a sense of eternity (Rom. 1:18-25; Ps. 19:1-3; Rom. 2:14-15; Ecc. 3:11). Consciously or not, unbelief involves suppressing this truth: “*although they knew God, they did not honor him,*” (Rom. 1:21).
3. Western society has shifted from ‘Christendom’ to “post-Christian.” We can no longer assume a widespread “background knowledge” of the Bible. Christianity is no longer valued as the social glue of society, but is increasingly seen as a threat to social progress.
4. In a hostile cultural context, the early church evangelized not primarily through public events, but through ordinary life lived intentionally to cultivate spiritual opportunities. During the key period of early Christian witness (AD 64-313), unbelievers were not invited to public worship. Evangelism was centered in the home, workplace, and the glowing lives of ordinary Christians.
5. True evangelism is a way of life characterized by being “friendly to people, liking people, and talking to people” about Jesus. Most of us don’t need new contacts. If we are friendly and interested in people (see them not as landscape or machines, but as souls), if we cultivate relationships and ask good questions, if we love our neighbor as ourselves, we will connect.
6. Effective gospel communication must involve clarity, sympathy, and respect (Col. 4:2-6; Mat. 7:12; 1 Pet. 3:15). We should avoid ‘Christianese’ and use simple definitions. We should work to understand and sympathize with the fears, hopes, and questions of others. We must respect people’s dignity and the pace of the Holy Spirit’s work in their lives.
7. Each culture has various “defeater beliefs” which make Christianity implausible or unattractive. These objections may be philosophical, emotional, scientific, religious or personal. It’s important to remember that behind every hard question is at least one hidden assumption.
8. Christians should be quick to acknowledge our own betrayals of Jesus. Christians have been active or complicit in legalism, oppression, political tribalism, racism, etc. In being honest about these sins, we keep the focus on Christ. The problem is not “too much Jesus,” but not enough Jesus!
9. Focus on the core facts of the Christian gospel. Within the family of Christ, it is appropriate that we seek to apply our faith to all spheres of life (*always* remembering Christian liberty). But with evangelism, keep the focus on the center. If Jesus rose from the dead, then everything he said matters and all of life must be subject to him. If he didn’t rise again, who cares what else he said?
10. Remember the cost of discipleship. Especially for those coming from other religions, conversion carries a high cost – loss of family, friends, prospects, even life itself. We should not be surprised if those considering this cost even seem to regress a bit – becoming *more* committed to their old ways for a time as they feel them slipping away. Jesus himself said the cost of following him is high (Lk. 14:28-33). We should acknowledge this, even as we insist Jesus is worth it.

Conclusion: “I’m already a Christian...”

1. Who is likely to say something like this to you?

- Lapsed Christians: those who grew up going to church, and may even have professed faith and been baptized. But over time, they drifted away, both publicly and privately. Neither the church nor the Bible play any significant role in their lives. Yet since they never consciously rejected the faith, they continue to think of themselves Christians.
- Limping Christians: those who became frustrated with some drift in their church and/or were seriously hurt. They may still identify with Jesus, but no longer with the church. They may read the Bible and pray, and even attend a private Bible study, but they have separated themselves from the public life (worship, work, witness) of the Christian community.
- Misled Christians: those who actively identify as believers and participate in a church – but one where the gospel is denied and/or distorted (theological liberalism, prosperity gospel, etc).
- Non-Protestant Christians: adherents of Roman Catholic or Eastern Orthodox churches where the gospel is intermixed with and obscured by dangerous and unbiblical traditions.

2. Though very different in some ways, what do all of these experiences have in common?

- The New Testament is no longer the sole/supreme voice in defining their Christianity:

Category	Working ‘Definition’ of Christianity	Scripture
<i>Lapsed</i>	Jesus can be my Savior without being my Lord	Jn. 14:15
<i>Limping</i>	I can be connected to Jesus without being connected to his body.	Heb. 10:25
<i>Misled</i>	I can be a Christian without centering my life on the gospel. The meaning of the gospel is subject to progressive change.	Gal. 1:6-9
<i>Non-Protestant</i>	The traditions of the church are equal to the text of Scripture.	Mk. 7:7

- Nevertheless, all of these still profess some attachment to Jesus Christ.

3. In interacting with folks in any of these categories, there are two temptations to resist:

- Resist the urge to anathematize persons, *and*
- Resist the urge to minimize significant differences.

4. Do not anathematize persons – don’t assume the worst!

- “For the one who is not against us is for us,” (Mk. 9:40).
- If they professes allegiance to Christ, our first instinct should be not suspicion, but welcome.
- Even if you have strong reasons to believe their understanding of the gospel is deficient, is it better to come alongside rather than condemn: “when Priscilla and Aquila heard [Apollos], they took him aside and explained to him the way of God *more accurately*,” (Ac. 18:26).
- *How?*
 - 1) Build relational capital, “Let’s get coffee...”
 - 2) Ask positive questions, “What are you reading in the Bible these days?”
 - 3) Seek to understand them, “Is there a reason you don’t go to church anymore?”
 - 3) Encourage them: “I hear you. Could we look at a passage together?”
- Teachability counts a ton!

5. Do not minimize significant differences/inconsistencies! (cf. chart above + next page)

Example: Roman Catholicism

6. Are there true Christians in the Roman Catholic Church (RCC)?

- Yes, definitely. Roman Catholics have an orthodox view of the Trinity and Christology, and have a clear view of the purpose of human life:¹

God, infinitely perfect and blessed in himself, in a plan of sheer goodness freely created man to make him share in his own blessed life. For this reason, at every time and in every place, God draws close to man. He calls man to seek him, to know him, to love him with all his strength. He calls together all men, scattered and divided by sin, into the unity of his family, the Church. To accomplish this, when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son as Redeemer and Saviour. In his Son and through him, he invites men to become, in the Holy Spirit, his adopted children and thus heirs of his blessed life. (CCC #1)

- In my hometown in Pennsylvania, RCC paid for a billboard saying simply, “Trust Jesus!”

7. Nevertheless, there are real problems with Roman Catholic doctrine:

- The RCC places the traditions of the RCC on the same level with Scripture:

...the Church, to whom the transmission and interpretation of Revelation is entrusted, “does not derive her certainty about all revealed truths from the holy Scriptures alone. Both Scripture and Tradition must be accepted and honoured with equal sentiments of devotion and reverence.” (#82)

- The RCC does not clearly distinguish between justification, sanctification, and sacraments:

“Justification is not only the remission of sins, but also the sanctification and renewal of the interior man.” (#1989)

Justification is conferred in Baptism, the sacrament of faith. It conforms us to the righteousness of God, who makes us inwardly just by the power of his mercy. (#1992)

Since the initiative belongs to God in the order of grace, no one can merit the initial grace of forgiveness and justification, at the beginning of conversion. Moved by the Holy Spirit and by charity, we can then merit for ourselves and for others the graces needed for our sanctification, for the increase of grace and charity, and for the attainment of eternal life. (#2010)

- The RCC teaches believers to venerate and pray to the saints, especially to Mary:

“Finally the Immaculate Virgin, preserved free from all stain of original sin, when the course of her earthly life was finished, was taken up body and soul into heavenly glory, and exalted by the Lord as Queen over all things...” (#966)

“In a wholly singular way she cooperated by her obedience, faith, hope, and burning charity in the Savior's work of restoring supernatural life to souls. For this reason she is a mother to us in the order of grace.” (#968)

“Taken up to heaven she did not lay aside this saving office but by her manifold intercession continues to bring us the gifts of eternal salvation Therefore the Blessed Virgin is invoked in the Church under the titles of Advocate, Helper, Benefactress, and Mediatrix.” (#969)

- The RCC teaches believers that forgiveness can only come through a priest:

Reconciliation with the Church is inseparable from reconciliation with God. (#1445)

Only priests who have received the faculty of absolving from the authority of the Church can forgive sins in the name of Christ. (#1495)

- One former RCC put it like this to Pastor Montgomery: whereas the OPC teaches people to trust Jesus alone for salvation, the RCC teaches people to trust the Church.

¹ All references labeled “CCC #X” or just “#X” are from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed (Washington, DC: US Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2019).