
Everyday Apologetics

A course for equipping believers with the knowledge, heart and skills to build bridges to share their faith in their everyday culture of opposing worldviews and ideas.

Course Objectives:

- To introduce the subject of apologetics
- To lay a foundation for equipping believers to effectively share their faith in a culture of opposing worldviews and ideas.
- To teach foundational tools for effective apologetics
- To be equipped with answers to some of the most commonly asked questions/objections about the Christian faith.
- To practice active listening and fielding questions.

Course outline over 5 sessions:

Session 1: The making of an apologist

Session 2: The big issues

Session 3: The big questions

Session 4: Practicing active listening and listening in to apologetic debates

Session 5: Answering questions

1

THE MAKING OF AN APOLOGIST

1.1 WHAT IS APOLOGETICS

It is NOT about apologising for being a Christian.

“Anything that helps people take Christianity more seriously than they did before.”
John Stackhouse

“Bridge-building”
Alister McGrath

“Theology in trainers”

Making people wish they'd never asked you why you became a Christian.

The biblical model and mandate is found in 1 Peter 3:15-16

¹⁵*But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be ready to give a logical defence to anyone who asks you to account for the hope that is in you. But do this with gentleness and respect,* ¹⁶*keeping a clear conscience... (NIV)*

¹⁵*But in your hearts set Christ apart as holy [and acknowledge Him] as Lord. Always be ready to give a logical defence to anyone who asks you to account for the hope that is in you, but do it courteously and respectfully. ¹⁶[And see to it that] your conscience is entirely clear (unimpaired), so that, when you are falsely accused as evildoers, those who threaten you abusively and revile your right behaviour in Christ may come to be ashamed [of slandering your good lives]. (Amp)*

Notice how important the way we do apologetics is. We begin with Jesus in our hearts, we operate with gentleness and respect, Always try to see where the other person is coming from.

1.2 WHY SHOULD WE BE PREPARED TO GIVE A LOGICAL DEFENCE?

“Every generation of Christians has this task of learning how to speak meaningfully to its own generation.”
Francis Schaeffer

“If all the world were Christians it might not matter if all the world were uneducated. But to be ignorant now – not to be able to meet our enemies on their own ground – would be to throw down our weapons.”
C.S. Lewis

“Of all the elements of Christianity, the most repugnant is the notion of the Christ who took our sins upon himself and sacrificed His body in agony to save our souls. Did we ask him to?”

Polly Toynbee, Review of Narnia in The Guardian, 2005

1.3 FIVE PARTS TO BECOMING AN EFFECTIVE APOLOGIST:

- 1st. **Set apart Christ as Lord**
- 2nd. **Be ready**
- 3rd. **Ask questions**
- 4th. **Build bridges**
- 5th. **Live it**

1st. **Set apart Christ as Lord** - *But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord...*

- When the Times asked for an essay on “What’s wrong with the world?” Chesterton replied: Dear sirs, I am. Sincerely yours. G.K.Chesterton
- Paul was stoned, run out of town on a regular basis, flogged, imprisoned....but he knew that he wasn’t doing this in his own strength.
- We don’t do the work, God does.

2nd. **Be ready** – *Always be ready to give a logical defense...*

- Know your Bible.
- Study - read books, watch DVDs, attend seminars, finish Bible School.
- Practice.

3rd. **Ask questions** - *to anyone who asks you...*

- Questions are the apologist’s most powerful tool.
Rule N1– bite your tongue.
- Never, never get trapped into an answer?
- Find out what is behind the question (more on this later)
e.g. How could God allow suffering?
Answer the pastoral need first:
Why are they asking the question?
- Become an expert at asking the right question?
- Angry questions are not a threat.
- Why do you ask that? What do you think?
Have you ever wondered whether?
What would it take you to change your mind (good for rooting out those who want to trip you up).
- Start from where the person is: “Today, I’m more into karma than Christianity.” How would Paul have dealt with this?
- We have to understand the power of worldviews and the hold they have over people. A worldview is a set of beliefs that people use to decide how to live and behave in the world. Most lost people have very inconsistent worldviews.

4th. Build bridges - with gentleness and respect -

- Apologetics must be about winning the person not the argument.
- Always acknowledge the strong points in another's arguments, and consider and acknowledge what you have in common.
- Need to be there when the rubber hits the road in people's lives.
- Look for points of contact and agreement – e.g. justice, why is there evil in the world, stewardship, suffering. Is there such a thing as right or wrong? Are there any fixed points?

5th. Live it – ¹⁶...keeping a clear conscience

- “What we practice, not what we preach is usually our great contribution to the conversion of others.” C.S. Lewis
- People *wanted* to be with Jesus.
- We don't need to make Christianity more exciting – stick to the story. If Christianity is dull then we are doing it wrong.
- Is your faith attractive?

Final thought - Tell stories

- Jesus was a story teller. What story have you got to tell? If you're not prepared to share something of yourself with other people, even strangers, why should they engage with you?
- Tell *your* story.

1.4 Paul – the great apologist

1 Cor 9:19-23 describes Paul's "winning" attitude:

¹⁹"Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible... ²²...I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some... ²³I do all this for the sake of the gospel..."

- Paul's letters are apologist texts. They are the earliest Biblical texts, earlier than the gospels.
- They were written to help the early church, to guide it and correct misunderstandings. They were the 'back to basics' campaign of their time.
- It portrays a world of competing ideas, a multi-faith market place, a decadent, sensual society.
- Paul's world and cultural landscape was just as hostile as ours is today.
- Paul was in the world with people who didn't believe. He wasn't in a comfortable Christian ghetto.

Case Study: Paul in Athens

Paul in Athens **Acts 17:16-34**. Paul is speaking to a sophisticated audience of philosophers. He is distressed to find them in the trawl of idols.

He is interesting enough to start with for them to want to listen to him – he gets an invite. He knows that they are interested in new things, so he stresses how new this is. He begins by saying what he saw on the way to the debate, an altar with an inscription to an unknown god. He then says what about if that god had a name, isn't far from us, is the same god that your poets have written about? What if that god was saying that right now was the time to repent?

He poses lots of provocative questions. He does it in a logical way, using a touch of flattery to engage his audience. He gently points out that there might be a flaw in their arguments. He tackles a big road block for these people – does death win? That is a road block today too.

He starts from philosophy and moves to real anxieties. It is not an identical-kit approach. He gets into their world view and uses their language. Can we say the same?

Homework:

Read the story of Jesus and the woman at the well in John 4 - List all the questions Jesus and the woman ask in this dialog. What was Jesus trying to achieve with each question He asked?

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THE BIG IDEAS

2.1 THE WORLD AS IT IS TODAY:

- Britain is multi-faith and post-Christian.
- There is a thirst for spiritual things. (There are more professing pagans than members of Baptist churches in the UK.)
- Our world is materially rich but spiritually poor
- People tend to shop for spiritual buzz and meaning (they pick and mix) – look at the British high street, role of football, health spas, mini shrines by the road, yoga, new age, alternative therapies. New Age ideas have had an impact.
- All is one. You are God. Altered consciousness is the goal. Unlimited power is available.
- There is also the problem of pleasure and nothingness.

2.2 Five big ideas which the apologist must content with:

1. All routes lead to the same God.
2. Nothing is true, everything is relative.
3. God never existed. Religion is a wish fulfilment.
4. God is dead – people are shaped by their economic conditions and class.
5. Science has killed God.

1. ALL ROUTES LEAD TO THE SAME GOD - LIBERALISM

- We live in a liberal and tolerant world.
- No religion has a monopoly on the one truth.
- In fact all seekers are seeking and experiencing the same God.
- Anyone who believes otherwise is a bigot or a fanatic.

2. Nothing is true – postmodernism

- This grew up in the cafes of the most advanced and cultured city in the world – Paris. It sprung from a good impulse – a fear that all successful ideas belong to the winners. There are limits to knowledge. Our culture and perspective have an impact on the way we see things.
- That there is no such thing as neutral truth. Knowledge is power.
- That totalitarian regimes use ideas of truth to justify killing people.
- The claim is that we all have our own truth but there is no one big meta-narrative that can explain everything. Language itself is unstable. God is part of this fiction. God is dead.

- This idea raged through intellectual circles in the late 60s, 70s and 80s. It overran university departments.
- It has trickled down into some commonly held beliefs.
- A truth passionately held is valid.
- I have my truth and you have your truth.
- History, books and accounts of events are not to be trusted – they are polluted by the perceptions of the writer. We cannot begin to understand the world and any attempt to do so is futile – history is dead and so is religion.
- Everything we have must be based on doubt
- With books, the writers intentions and meaning are nothing, all that matters is the way we perceive it and filter it through our own prejudices.
- But surely there is a problem – to say there is no such thing as truth is to assert an absolute truth.
- How do we deal with evil – with good and bad? How would we handle the holocaust.
- Is there any such thing as objective reality?
- Is there really no common moral ground between cultures? Surely there are values that go beyond culture and if so where do they come from?

3. Wish fulfilment – Freud

- Freud was one of the great geniuses of human history. Although his ideas are discredited in many ways he came from a good instinct – to understand how our minds work and what makes us human. His case studies are great stories.
- Freud picked up on earlier ideas, but his central theme in relation to faith was that God is a mass wish-fulfilment.
- We cannot face life as it is so we have come up with a father figure – and heaven as a consolation.
- This idea still holds a lot of power today. It is linked to the idea that Christianity is for weak people, people who can't look life in the eye.
- But is this true?
- Friends report that at a dinner party when the name of Jesus was mentioned Freud suddenly went quiet and began heavily perspiring. He had a panic attack. Somehow he still had issues with God and couldn't quite write him off so easily.
- But there are lots of examples of Christians who aren't weak? The Romans were converted partly due to the incredible bravery of Christians.
- If we were inventing a consolation would we invent this one?
- Just because it may console, does it make it wrong?
- In nature there seems to be an answer to all our deepest needs – so why not God?
- Why do those who see it as a crutch not see their own atheism as a crutch?
- Why have so many millions believed, and continue to believe?
- Why do rational intelligent adults become Christians?

4. Society shapes people – Communism

- Marxism seems to be finished but it left a legacy.
- We are the product of an economic and class system.
- We are made and moulded by this system.
- God was invented by the ruling classes as an opiate.
- But there is a problem with the Marxist utopia.
- People become expendable, numbers that can be sacrificed for the greater good.

5. Science killed God - Scientism

- This is very powerful today.
- Richard Dawkins and others have sold hundreds of thousands of books and have a strong media presence.
- Oddly, they have pushed “religion” back into the public eye – which can only be a good thing.
- They do make some powerful points – we believe in healing, so why did God never get an amputated leg to re-grow, we attribute a lot to God that would probably have happened anyway.
- We are the product of accident and chance
- There is no God and this world is all there is. We are alone.
- Only science can explain the world, because it is rational and religion cannot be tested or proved.
- There is no such thing as right or wrong.
- Religion is superstition and belongs to the dark ages.
- It is spread by a virus of the mind.
- It causes wars (atheists don't go storming the local synagogue)
- These ideas have deeply filtered through into today's world.
- They have left a scientific dusting over the debate.
- They are very hostilely put and make sweeping generalisations about Christianity.
- They are offensive and can lead us to respond in the same manner.
- They should be seen as an opportunity.



The Big Questions - do we have answers?

*"I am incurably convinced that the object of opening the mind,
as of opening the mouth, is to shut it again on something
solid." - G.K. Chesterton*

The big questions

1. Is there a cure for suffering
2. Do all roads lead to the same God?
3. Is religion dangerous?
4. Did Science kill God?

Write down a few other difficult questions which you find difficult to answer:

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1. IS THERE A CURE FOR SUFFERING?

- This is very difficult for Christianity to deal with. But no world view finds this an easy question.
- How could God allow us to suffer so much?
- Why do good people suffer?
- Why is God so weak and/or absent?
- Is suffering a design-fault?
- We must start from where the person asking this actually is. *Why* do they ask? Is there a pastoral need that needs attending to first? Be prepared to really open up ourselves and our own stories.
- We have a natural ancestral home without suffering. We rebelled. We are separated from God by sin. Our bodies break down. We live on a turbulent planet. This is why we find suffering such a scandal – because we remember something else.
- Suffering seems to have a purpose. We grow through it. It is God's clarion call. We begin to ask the questions that matter.
- Without pain, joy would mean nothing. Pain somehow throws life into colour.

Why doesn't God step in? Is God able? Is God willing?

- Christians have a radical view of our own freedom. Our God is no tyrant. We are free and much good and much suffering comes from our freedom. We are free to drink, eat, lust, smoke, collaborate with evil regimes, stand back and do nothing when we should have acted.
- This freedom (plus sin) is frequently behind suffering.
- But what about natural disasters? The world is free too – there are laws of nature. It is dynamic.
- Why does God intervene at certain times, but not at others?

A cure for suffering?

- Is suffering the full story of our lives?
- We believe that God has a cure for our suffering. God intervened in history. He burst into it.
- The humble carpenter had a mission – to heal the broken hearted and to overcome death.
- His mission involved many healings – he was grieved by people's suffering. He hated it too.
- He suffered and in his suffering, he offers us HOPE in the midst of our own suffering.
- He gave us hope that we can and will return home.
- "In the world you will have trouble. But take heart; I have overcome the world."
- Jesus (John 16:33)

Other worldviews and suffering

- Eastern religions – suffering is an illusion. The goal is non-attachment; non-reality.
- What is reality?
- *“Rebuked by his wife for not shedding a tear over the death of their only son, the man said, “Last night I had a dream in which I had seven sons; when I woke, the dream vanished. Who shall I weep for, the seven who are vapour or the one that is dust? The seven were a dream, the one, a day-dream.”*
- Sai Baba
- What about Karma?
- How do atheists deal with it?

2. DO ALL ROADS LEAD TO THE SAME GOD?

- This is a very common idea today and comes from a good place.
- Must guard against attacking other faiths.
- Can they all be true?
- Is this the great wish-fulfilment?
- All worldviews make truth claims.
- Each make a pitch for truth – even those that deny the idea of truth altogether.
- Different explanations of our brokenness, our path to salvation, the character of God, end times, heaven, how God interacts with us.
- From reincarnation, nothingness, pantheism, impersonal forces, accident.
- Christianity has the most thrilling and all-encompassing story.
- Christianity holds true because it most adequately faces the difficult questions.
- Christianity is the only worldview that can truly be lived – not just a theory.

3. IS RELIGION DANGEROUS?

- This is a very common idea propagated by fundamentalist atheists.
- Irish “troubles”, Lebanon, 9/11, etc...
- Jesus never carried a sword. Love wins. Death loses.
- *“But I say to you who hear, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.”*
– Jesus (Luke 6:27)
- *People* cause wars.

4. DID SCIENCE KILL GOD?

There is a feeling that religion somehow belongs to the dark ages – that it cannot be proved as science can – and so it is simply a superstition.

One great question to get us started with here is – so why hasn't Science killed off God when it has nearly 200 years to do so? Odd isn't it.

QUESTIONS:

Are science and religion at war?

- It is a common idea that science and religion are somehow opposed – locked in a battle to the death with only one likely winner – Science. Rational atheism is the only progressive view. But is this true?
- Does religion discourage human discovery? One classic incident is often mentioned here: the shoddy treatment of Galileo by the Church. Galileo discovered that the earth revolved around the sun. His views were suppressed and he spent years under house arrest and was “forced” to recant. But perhaps the story isn't quite as simple as this. For many years the church sheltered and encouraged Galileo's work.
- Indeed his main opponents were not people of religion but the philosophers and intellectual opinion-formers of the day. His views hugely challenged their world view. His dispute with the church arose over a book he wrote in which he created a thinly-veiled caricature of the Pope named the Donkey. Galileo never lost his faith. He believed that his discoveries pointed towards God.
- Stephen Jay Gould is a leading evolutionary biologist in the United States has said:

“Either half my colleagues are enormously stupid, or else the science of Darwinism is fully compatible with conventional religious beliefs and equally compatible with atheism.”

- In his book *One World*, John Polkinghorne eloquently stated:
“In the early expansion of the universe there has to be a close balance between the expansive energy (driving things apart) and the force of gravity (pulling things together). If expansion dominated then matter would fly apart too rapidly for condensation into galaxies and stars to take place. Nothing interesting could happen in so thinly spread a world. On the other hand, if gravity dominated, the world would collapse in on itself again before there was time for the processes of life to get going. For us to be possible requires a balance between the effects of expansion and contraction which at a very early epoch in the universe's history (the Planck time) has to differ from equality by not more than 1 in 1060. The numerate will marvel at such a degree of accuracy. For the non-numerate I will borrow an illustration from Paul Davies of what that accuracy means. He points out that it is the same as aiming at a target an inch wide on the other side of the observable universe, twenty thousand million light years away, and hitting the mark!”

Are there are limits to science?

- Science only ever presents probabilities. All Science is work-in-progress. It is our best answer at the time. When new evidence comes along scientists must revise their understanding.
- Indeed Science can answer certain questions but not others. Nobel prize winner, Sir Peter Medawar, who is not a Christian, but a rationalist, pointed out that *Science cannot answer relatively childish questions like – What are we here for? And what is the point of living?*

Can honest, intelligent scientists also be Christians?

- A major study in the United States. Two studies were conducted – one in 1916 and one in 1996. In both it was found that about 40% of scientists believed in a God who actively relates to human beings and answers prayer.
- Francis Collins is director of the Human Genome Project. He became a Christian influenced by his sense of wonder at the order of nature.
- Paul Davis a cosmologist and author of *The Goldilocks Enigma* points to the extraordinary bio-friendliness of the universe and feels this points to some degree of fine tuning.
- John Polkinghorne, in *Science and Creation: The Search for Understanding*, wrote “We are so familiar with the fact that we can understand the world that most of the time we take it for granted. It is what makes science possible. Yet it could have been otherwise. The universe might have been a disorderly chaos rather than an orderly cosmos. Or it might have had a rationality which was inaccessible to us...There is a congruence between our minds and the universe, between the rationality experienced within and the rationality observed without.”

4

Practicing Active Listening

ACTIVITY ONE

Break into groups and pick one of the big questions:

1. How can there be a God when there is so much suffering in the world?
2. Don't all roads lead to the same God?
3. Isn't religion dangerous?
4. Didn't science kill God?
5. How can you trust the Bible?

Role model answering your question using the four active-listening steps below.

Prepare a brief response to the question.

Active-listening steps for considering a good answer:

1. What ideas and assumptions are behind the question?
2. What appropriate broad follow-up questions can I ask?
3. What "narrowing-down" questions should I ask?
4. What ideas or concepts do I need to incorporate into my response?

ACTIVITY TWO

Listen to a Dawkins v Lennox debate – (<http://www.fixed-point.org/index.php/video/35-full-length/164-the-dawkins-lennox-debate>)

Make notes

1. Note examples of the tone of both speakers.
2. Note examples of loaded language.
3. Pick up issues from both speakers where you are left with questions or doubts.
4. In three sentences what is each speaker's main argument.



Devil's Advocate

The objective of this session is to role-play some apologetics discussions/debates, in order to observe and learn how we may more effectively “give reasons for the hope which we have.”

The format for the debate:

1. A proposition/quote from “A Letter to a Christian Nation” will be stated.
2. The negative speaker (Christian) will present a 3-minute opening argument *against* the proposition.
3. The affirmative speaker (non-Christian) will present a 3-minute counter argument.
4. Both speakers will engage in a 5-minute open dialogue.
5. The class will have 3 minutes at closing for asking questions of either of the two speakers.

Total time for each proposition debate: 14 minutes

Consider the following four challenging propositions / quotes from “A Letter to a Christian Nation”:

1. “The Goodness of God”

Somewhere in the world a man has abducted a little girl. Soon he will rape, torture, and kill her. If an atrocity of this kind is not occurring at precisely this moment, it will happen in a few hours, or days at the most. Such is the confidence we can draw from the statistical laws that govern the lives of six billion human beings. The same statistics also suggest that this girl’s parents believe – as you believe – that an all-powerful and all-loving God is watching over them and their family. Are they right to believe this? Is it *good* that they believe this? No. The entirety of atheism is contained in this response. Atheism is not a philosophy; it is not even a view of the world; it is simply an admission of the obvious.

2. “Inspired Maths”

A book written by an omniscient being could contain a chapter on mathematics that, after two thousand years of continuous use, would still be the richest source of mathematical insight humanity has ever known. Instead, the Bible contains no formal discussion of mathematics and some obvious mathematical errors. In two places, for instance the Good Book states that the ratio of the circumference of a circle to its diameter is 3:1 (1 Kings 7:23-26 and 2 Chronicles 4:2-5). As an approximation of the constant Pi, this is not impressive. The decimal expansion of Pi runs to infinity – 3.1415926535... – and modern computers now allow us to calculate it to any degree of accuracy we like. Bu the Egyptians and Babylonians both approximated Pi to a few decimal places several centuries before the oldest books of the Bible were written. The Bible offers an approximation that is terrible even by the standards of the ancient world.

3. “An Imaginary Friend”

Examples of God’s failure to protect humanity are everywhere to be seen. The city of New Orleans, for instance, was recently destroyed by a hurricane. More than a thousand people died; tens of thousands lost all their earthly possessions; and nearly a million were displaced. It is safe to say that almost every person living in New Orleans at the moment Hurricane Katrina struck shared your belief in an omnipotent, omniscient, and compassionate God. But what was God doing while Katrina laid waste to their city? Surely He heard the prayers of those elderly men and women who fled the rising waters for the safety of their attics, only to be slowly drowned there. These were people of faith. These were good men and women who had prayed throughout their lives. Do you have the courage to admit the obvious? These poor people died talking to an imaginary friend.

4. “Prophecy?”

Christians regularly assert that the Bible predicts future historical events...But just imagine how breathtakingly specific a work of prophecy would be, if it were actually the product of omniscience. If the Bible were such a book, it would make perfectly accurate predictions about human events. You would expect it to contain a passage as “In the latter half of the twentieth century, humankind will develop a globally linked system of computers – the principles of which I set forth in Leviticus – and this system shall be called the Internet.” The Bible contains nothing like this. In fact, it does not contain a single sentence that could not have been written by a man or woman living in the first century. This should trouble you.

Feedback Criteria:

Your fellow classmates will be watching, listening and taking notes to feedback to each speaker based on the following criteria:

1. **Clarity** – How clearly did the speaker present his/her points? (i.e., were the easy to understand, or did they use lots of Christian jargon?)

2. **Logic** – How *logical* were the speakers’ points? Were they *consistent* in their reasoning? Or did they present contradictions?

3. **Relevance** – How *relevant* were the speakers’ points? Were they able to apply examples from everyday life to support their points? Did they use stories?

4. **Awareness** – How *aware* were the speakers? Did they respond directly to the questions and issues raised? Did they seem to engage in active listening?

Additional suggested reading on the subject of apologetics:

Basic:

- Questions of Life, by Nicky Gumble
- Searching Issues, by Nicky Gumble
- Evangelism Made Slightly Less Difficult, by Nick Pollard
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Intermediate:

- Bridge Building, by Alister McGrath
- The End of Reason, by Ravi Zacharias
- God On Mute, by Pete Greig
- The Case For the Real Jesus, Lee Strobel
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Advanced:

- Orthodoxy, by G.K. Chesterton
- Surprised by Hope, by Tom Wright
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Websites:

- www.garyhabermas.com
- www.reasonablefaith.org
- www.rzim.org
- www.apologetics.org
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