



Apologetics

Theology on the Go

Jeffrey Stivason, editor



ALLIANCE OF CONFESSING EVANGELICALS

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INTERVIEW¹

Jonathan Master:² We are here today with Scott Oliphint, professor of apologetics and systematic theology at Westminster Theological Seminary, to discuss covenantal apologetics. Dr. Oliphint, thank you for joining us.

Scott Oliphint:³ Thank you. It is great to be here.

JM: Before we get into "covenantal apologetics", can you give a brief definition of just Christian apologetics in general?

SO: Yes, well the word "apologetic" is not one in popular use today. It comes from a Greek term which means "defense," so when we are talking about apologetics generally, we are talking about a defense of something. Plato wrote an apology which included Socrates' defense of his own behavior. When we use it in the Christian context, we are talking about defending the Christian faith.

JM: How is "covenantal apologetics" different, or distinct from the broader application of the term?

SO: I think that the primary difference that the name "covenantal apologetics" implies is its foundation in reformed theology. There are a couple of ways to think about this. One is the covenant that God made with man. As the Westminster Confession of Faith puts it, that implies and entails "God's voluntary condescension," by which He relates Himself to creation generally, and man specifically (who is made in God's image). That is God's covenantal initiation, sovereignly administered. On the basis of that relationship, all people are understood to be under one of two covenant representatives: either in Adam (in which case they abide under God's wrath), or in Christ (in which case they abide under God's grace).

JM: So then, if everyone is in covenant with God, how does that play out in terms of apologetics?

SO: Most centrally, one of the things that we try to help people understand is that everyone has some kind of relationship to the true God. Paul articulates this in Romans 1 by saying that all of us who are fallen in Adam nevertheless know the true God because God reveals Himself through creation. As Paul explains, this is not a happy relationship; it is a relationship in which the wrath of God abides on us. So when we are talking to people outside of Christ, it is important for us to recognize that these are people who are already in a relationship with God, who know God but (as Paul says) "suppress the truth in unrighteousness."

JM: So in other words, they are not neutral?

SO: Exactly! They are not neutral with respect to God. Now, these are things that Scripture tells us which many (probably most) unbelievers would not admit to. So the point here is not what we say to them, but rather what we believe about them as we are talking to them. For example, because we recognize that people already have the truth, our goal in apologetics is to communicate the truth (which comes from special revelation) to them such that it meets with the truth that God has already been communicating to them (through general revelation). What we are doing in our apologetic is presupposing the truth of Scripture as we approach people who already know the true God but suppress that truth. In this way, God's revelation makes a connection between belief and unbelief.

JM: And so this method requires a knowledge of the Bible, a knowledge about what God has revealed about Himself.

SO: Right, and I think one of the most exciting things about this approach is this: since God commands every Christian to be ready to give a defense (1 Peter 3:15), He also provides the tools that we need to fulfill that command. All we really need is the Word of God and the Spirit of God. Once we have those, we can meet the objections that come. Now, some of those objections can be very sophisticated, and so there are times when it is useful to answer

sophisticated objections with sophisticated arguments. But that is not always the case in apologetics; some times the objections are simpler. These are the kinds of objects that we in the Church ought be ready to meet, and in order to do that we must understand and apply the truths of Scripture to people who abide under the wrath of God because they know Him.

JM: You have mentioned the Word of God and the Spirit of God. When it comes to the content of the Word of God, what things would you say someone really needs to understand in order to share the Gospel faithfully and well?

SO: In the history of Reformed thinking we talk about the *principia* (a Latin word which means "foundations") for Christianity. One is the foundation of knowledge, which is Scripture itself and God's revelation more generally; the other is the foundation of existence, which is God Himself. So the first things that we have to get straight are these two foundations of the Christian faith, what Scripture is and who God is. Once we think about that latter *principium*, we immediately then move to God as Father, Son, and Spirit, and how the triune God operates in the economy of redemption. The Father sends the Son to accomplish what Adam failed to do, and we have faith in the Son by the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit. I believe those things are all requisite for communicating and defending the Christian faith.

JM: One last question: could you please draw the distinction a little more sharply between covenantal apologetics and other kinds of apologetics. What do you see as some of the core problems or deficiencies with other kinds of apologetics?

SO: I would say, for one, the apologetic which most closely follows that of Thomas Aquinas has (by Aquinas's own admission) its roots in a neutral notion of reason. Influenced by Aristotle, Thomas thought it was possible, even necessary, to demonstrate the truth of theism by through reason alone. In that situation, the *principium* of apologetics is reason, and not revelation. That seems like a serious problem if your theology is reformed.

The Evidentialists (as they are called) claim that if you mount enough evidences for the truth of Christianity, those evidences ought to be convincing. I remember one author who said that anyone with moral honesty ought to concede that these evidences prove what they are meant to prove. Again, the problem is that the unbeliever is bent against moral honest. He will not interpret those evidences according to some neutral understanding—he will instead interpret them according to his bent of suppressing the truth.

Having said that, I believe the covenantal approach allows for evidences and arguments, even the kinds of arguments which Thomas Aquinas used. But when we argue or use evidence, we have to be careful about the foundations and assumptions that we are buying into. We need to make sure that our foundation is God and His revelation, not a neutral notion of evidence or reason.

JM: That is very helpful, and we appreciate your time. Scott Oliphint, thank you for sitting in here.

BASIC APPROACHES

Michael Roberts⁴

There are three basic approaches or schools of what is called “apologetics.” This word comes directly from the Greek, which has to do with the idea of giving a defense. So what is being talked about is how one goes about trying to defend the truth of the Christian faith. That there are three approaches, however, does not mean that everyone fits neatly into one of them. People do borrow from each, and while a person might prefer one school over another, it is not uncommon for such a person to grant the value, and even, at times, the necessity, of the others.

The Classical Approach

Historically, classical apologetics has used five arguments for the existence of God.

- 1) **Cosmological argument**—This is the argument from cause to effect. Every effect, that is, everything that happens, must have an appropriate cause. The only appropriate cause for the existence of everything is God. No one or nothing else can account for the existence of the universe.
- 2) **Teleological argument**—This is the argument from purpose and design. That the world is characterized by precise and intricate order and regularity shows that it cannot have come about by chance, that is, by mere mathematical probability. There must be one who designed the universe to work as it does. This designer must be God.
- 3) **Ontological argument**—This is the argument from existence.

We are finite and imperfect beings who live in a world that is finite and imperfect. Nevertheless our minds are able to conceive of a being who is absolutely perfect and infinite. Because we are able to do this, such a being must exist, and this being is God.

4) **Anthropological argument**—This is the argument from the makeup of mankind. People possess both intelligence and a sense of right and wrong. They can only have these qualities if the being who brought mankind into existence is both intelligent and moral. This intelligent and moral being is God.

5) **Ethnological argument**—This argument appeals to the universality of religious beliefs. Everyone has some form of belief in a deity, even if that deity ends up being another person or even themselves. For this basic belief in deity to exist (even though such beliefs may be idolatrous), there must be a universal cause for it, and this cause is God.

Numerous weaknesses to each of these arguments have been made. For our purposes here, the most important one is that none of them necessarily leads to the one true God who has revealed Himself uniquely in Scripture and in His Son. These classical arguments can lead to a general concept of God; but at some point, if these arguments are used, one will need to make the assumption that the God to whom these arguments point is the God of the Bible.

The Evidentialist Approach

As the name indicates, evidentialism is concerned with providing evidences for the truth of Christianity. Those of this school tend, therefore, to focus on arguments from fulfilled prophecy and miracles, particularly the resurrection of Jesus. Their initial goal is to show the reasonableness of believing that the Bible's account of history is trustworthy, and that the prophecies and miracles are credible. The evidentialist will then go on to make the concluding case that Jesus was indeed God and that one needs to repent of his sin and trust in Christ.

Probably the most common critique of this approach is that it can,

even unintentionally, depend too much on human reason and the skill of the one making the case. No matter how good the presentation might be, one's acceptance of the Gospel is rooted in the work of the Holy Spirit in bringing clarity to the mind and conviction to the heart. In addition, there is the challenge of trying to overcome biases against the historicity of the Bible. If someone believes from the beginning of the discussion that there are errors in the Bible, it is going to be rather difficult to change such a person's mind though Bible history alone. Because of this, sometimes evidentialists will appeal to scientific observations and other arguments from classical apologetics to try to establish some common ground at a more basic level, before moving on to arguments from prophecy and miracles.

The Presuppositional (Covenantal) Approach

That people generally do not approach the Bible from a kind of neutral position—that they do possess assumptions about it from the beginning—leads to the third approach of apologetics, which is presuppositionalism. Those of this school maintain that while evidences drawn from philosophy, nature, history, and Scripture can certainly be useful, one needs to begin somewhere else. One needs to start with the belief that God has spoken to us and revealed himself in the Bible.

We all have presuppositions, that is, we all make assumptions about what is true and what is false. We make assumptions about why the world looks and operates the way it does. We make assumptions about what things are important in life and which are not. And these assumptions are formed by a whole host of things, such as family upbringing, educational and economic advantages, friends, and the influences of the broader culture around us. No one, then, is purely neutral or objective. Everyone possesses a viewpoint, or worldview, concerning these and other subjects.

A secularist's viewpoint is no more objective or neutral than a Christian's. Each one tenaciously clings to presuppositions that drive his thinking and acting. The secularist is making the assumption that the universe is closed—that there is no God who is responsible for

its creation, operation, and preservation. Thus from there, while the secularist may realize that there are things in the world that are not as they should be—that things are done to him by others that are “wrong” and that he does things that are “wrong”—he nevertheless assumes that there is no such thing as sin and a future judgment for those sins from which he needs to be delivered and for which he needs to be forgiven. But he cannot prove any of it on paper. He presupposes it and so makes choices according to those presuppositions.

Likewise, the Christian is making assumptions too; however, he is assuming that the universe is open. There is a God who made, governs, and sustains it by His perfect wisdom. And beyond this, the Christian believes that God is active in it. He can perform things outside of what is usually observed. Like the secularist, the Christian also realizes that things are wrong with the world and with himself. But unlike the secularist, the Christian considers these wrongs to be “sins,” the Bible’s term for offenses against the holy God. Thus, in the Christian’s worldview, there is going to be a future judgment from which one needs deliverance and forgiveness; and only in the Bible can one learn how these are experienced. Also like the secularist, the Christian cannot prove any of this on paper. He, too, presupposes it (though granted such presupposing can only come from the Holy Spirit’s convicting grace) and so makes choices according to those presuppositions.

Presuppositional apologetics challenges the secularist, and everyone else, to see how inconsistent his presuppositions are—that his life and his world around him do not make sense without a biblical view of God as both Creator and Redeemer, and mankind as created and sinful. If one adopts the set of “givens” that the Bible puts forth about God, creation, ourselves, and Christ, then Scripture’s explanation for how all of them fit together, culminating in the assurance of the forgiveness of sins and of peace with God in this world and in the unending one to come, makes perfect sense.

Once this basic starting point of presuppositions has been established, depending on who you are talking with, arguments and evidences

from the other two apologetic approaches may be helpful. As well as possible, consider the other person with whom you are trying to share the gospel. It may be that he or she already possesses a measure of openness to listen to you, and may respond quite well to various evidences. But others may be more set against the Christian faith, in which case revealing their own assumptions may first need to be done before you can go on to have a more profitable discussion by sharing your assumptions derived from Scripture.

Remember, too, that God calls all believers to give an answer to everyone who asks (I Pet. 3:15). As we humbly seek His help, and then watch for opportunities, He promises to go before us and accomplish His sovereign will in the lives of those to whom He is directing us.

SPIRITUAL SELF-DEFENSE

Jeffery Stivason⁵

In his first epistle, Peter has been talking about believers living in a world hostile to the faith. In chapter 3 of verse 13, we read this question, "Who is there to harm you if you prove zealous for what is good?" You can imagine the looks that must have floated around the room when this was read. There must have been at least one person thinking, "Is this guy serious? Uh, I can name a few who not only can harm us but that have...starting with Emperor Nero!"

But Peter is not an ivory tower exegete. He knows that they are ultimately protected by the Lord; in fact, he says so in the opening chapter. But he also understands that they are aliens living in a frightful world and someone may harm them. Look at what he says in the very next verse, "But even if you should suffer..." You see what Peter is doing? He is trying to help us to have an ultimate perspective while we live in penultimate circumstances. He wants us to have an already outlook in a not yet situation.

Why is that important? The answer is really simple. We are in the habit of focusing on the fearful things in our lives instead of the things that drive out fear. So, Peter is anxious to give us a defense that will put our fears to rest. And the defense which he offers begins like any self-defense technique. It begins with a right stance, a place from which everything else flows. Notice what the text says, "...sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts..." Quite literally Peter is saying that Christ is to be set apart as Lord in our hearts.

But what does it mean to set Christ apart as Lord in our hearts and in our very lives? Quite simply, it means that Christ must be our ultimate authority. The believer must have an ultimate commitment

to Christ. Christ is Lord. Now, perhaps you're thinking something like this, "But isn't Christ Lord already? He can't simply be Savior and not Lord, right?" And the answer is, "Yes, if He is Savior, then He must be Lord." But likely that prompts you to ask another question, "Then why are we told that we must set apart Christ as Lord in our hearts?"

Think about what's happening here. We have a quote from Isaiah 12 in verse 14 ("Do not fear their intimidations and do not be troubled"), which looks very much like what we read in verse 6 ("Do what is right without being frightened by any fear"). There Peter was telling the wife to live faithfully before God without being frightened by any fear or intimidation from the unbelieving husband because the husband could not ultimately harm her, though physically he may have been more than capable. It is this situation, or one similar, that Peter has in mind. The Apostle is thinking about relationships between believers and unbelievers and specifically the one's he has outlined.

Consequently, Calvin says, "This sanctification ought to be confined to the present case. For whence is it that we are overwhelmed with fear, and think ourselves lost, when danger is impending, except that we ascribe to mortal man more power to injure us than to God to save us?" In other words, we fear most when we attribute more power to man to hurt us than to God to save us. Now, listen to what Calvin says in the very next sentence, it reminds you of what we started with, "God promises that He will be the guardian of our salvation; the ungodly on the other hand attempt to subvert it."

Now, what is it that the ungodly attempt to subvert? Our salvation? No! That would be impossible. Then what are they trying to subvert? Our hope and confidence in God to save us! That is the whole reason why we are to sanctify Christ in our hearts so that they won't be able to subvert this hope. Therefore, speaking about this conviction in the heart, Calvin concludes, "For if this conviction takes full possession of our minds, that the help promised by the Lord is sufficient for us, we shall be well fortified to repel all the fears of unbelief." In other words, if you begin with the correct stance of

faith, then you will be in the position of defense in order to repel fear producing attacks leveled against us.

Now, that can be difficult. We are easily led into fear. Our trouble is that we fear men, and when we fear men we start to doubt the truth. That's why we need to set apart Christ as Lord in our hearts.

Perhaps a story will set this teaching in context. Several years ago I read Jon Krakauer's "Into Thin Air." It is the story about the ill fated ascent of Mt Everest in 1996, in which many lives were lost, including some adept leaders. At one point, Krakauer recounts an episode about Andy Harris, one of the guides. Harris was simply exhausted from the trek to the summit. On the descent, Harris and his oxygen deprived party came across a cache of oxygen canisters. But because Harris was exhausted and starved for oxygen he unreasonably argued with the group that all the bottles were empty! A heated breathless argument ensued. Those less oxygen worn argued that the canisters were indeed full. In fact, they were the ones who had left them at that very site! But Harris was beguiled by exhaustion and lack of oxygen and refused to use them.

Think about that story as a parable. We run into a good many like oxygen deprived Andy Harris, arguing that God doesn't exist and angry that our hope is in Christ. In effect, they are arguing that the bottles are empty! And yet, Peter says, "Don't be intimidated by them." Realize that they are suppressing the truth in unrighteousness. Like Harris, they are beguiled, breathing thin spiritual air and unreasonable. Do not be troubled; set Christ apart as Lord in your heart. Rest in Him, no matter the issue, and do not let anyone undermine that commitment. Peter's point is painfully clear. Resolutely cling to Christ as the authority of all in life. When you do you will be always ready to tell your opponent why you have the hope that you do. Take every thought captive in obedience to Christ and do not fear their intimidation or be troubled by them.

Let me ask you, are you ready?

MODELING SCRIPTURE'S METHOD TO ITS MESSAGE

Grant Van Leuven⁶

My seminary professor of missions, Rev. Steven F. Miller, emphasized what is often glossed over when discussing and doing mission work: the Bible presents not only a message but a method of its delivery. Similarly, the Bible has its own method of apologetics (self-defense) to which we must defer: it presents itself as God's Self-revelation to be received and accepted on its own authority.

Rather than try and prove the Bible is true before its Messenger could be considered worthy of an audience, we should presuppose that the Truth will speak for Himself and be heard through His Own recorded, gripping, powerful voice.⁷ Greg Bahnsen explains, "... the message claiming to be from God would have to be its own authority ... only God is adequate to bear witness to Himself or to authorize His own words."⁸ Thus Hebrews 6:13 documents how God proved the veracity of His words to Abraham by swearing by Himself, for there is no greater testimony than His own Self-attesting witness. Robert Reymond points out that to insist on Scripture's own self-authentication as sole and sufficient grounds for everyone's believing and obeying it is in no way arrogant: "The presuppositional apologist ... does not believe that he can improve upon the total message that God has commissioned him to give to fallen men."⁹

The Bible's own verification of its being God-breathed should be our primary default. Gordon Clark writes, "The first reason for believing the Bible is inspired is that the Bible claims to be inspired."¹⁰ And so we see "Christ's view of the Bible can very quickly be indicated. Christ said: It is written!"¹¹ A Biblical apologist thus grounds the

warrant for his witnessing style in the same manner as the prophets: "Thus saith the Lord!" Thus is the apostles' example in Acts. As Reymond declares, "...the God of Scripture calls upon human beings to begin with or 'presuppose' him in all their thinking (Exod. 20:3; Prov. 1:7)."¹²

This presuppositional apologetic method is alone seen in Scripture and is clearly required in the Westminster Confession of Faith 4.1: "The authority of the Holy Scripture, for which it ought to be believed, and obeyed, dependeth not upon the testimony of any man, or Church; but wholly upon God (who is truth itself) the author thereof: and therefore it is to be received, because it is the Word of God." This assertion is standard stuff.¹⁴

The confessions teach us not to try and support the Bible, but share it; not to prove it, but proclaim it. We ought not invite people to feign autonomy and put God's Word under a microscope, but instead require them to lay themselves under it and be examined, also presupposing their God-given dependence as well as ability to know when He specially speaks to them. Clark writes:

[Revelation] is needed as the basis of a rational world-view... constructive thought must presuppose information that has been divinely given ... man's endowment with rationality, his innate ideas and a priori categories, his ability to think and speak were given to him by God for the essential purpose of receiving a verbal revelation, of approaching God in prayer, and of conversing with other men about God and spiritual realities.¹⁵

Other presuppositions reflected in this chapter of the Confession are involved: everyone knows they have a Creator and are "left unexcusable" (section 1), yet all need the Holy Spirit's enabling to savingly hear Him interpret and speak and rule through the Scriptures (sections 5-6, 9-10).

Let us not cater to man's desire for proof that the Scriptures are the Word of God, for this approach supports a distanced skepticism. Speak relevant Scriptures while relating "without apology" to foster immediate conviction whether it be pricking or cutting of hearts. When some cover their ears at hearing Christ by His method,

recognize they are getting His message. Further, to start with or settle for less is unscriptural and irreverent: "... an argument that reduces revelational data to 'brute data' pointing at best to the possibility of God's existence is a totally inadequate, even apostate, argument that Christians should not use or endorse ... it is not God who is the felon on trial, men are the felons. It is not God's character and word which are questionable; men's are (Job 40:1, 8; Rom. 3:4; 9:20)."¹⁶

HOW TO TELL OTHERS ABOUT CHRIST

James Boice¹⁷

When Jesus Christ told His disciples that they were to "Go... and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 28:19), the Lord was giving them what the Duke of Wellington once described as "marching orders" for the church. They were to tell others about Him. They were to carry the Gospel everywhere.

Unfortunately, it is entirely possible for you to understand this commission and even want to tell others about Jesus Christ and yet still not know how. You might say: I know what I should do, but how do I do it? How do I show that Jesus is the answer to the kid next door who is on drugs? How do I get my very sophisticated roommate to admit her need for Jesus Christ? How do I get the mechanic who works on my car to listen to my testimony? How do I overcome the built-in hostility toward the gospel in those who work with me every day? What words do I use to talk about Christ to my wife, my husband, my children, or my friends? If you have ever asked these questions or are still asking them, then a study of the way in which Jesus related to the woman of Samaria in John 4 should be of help to you. As I look at Christ's dealings with the woman of Samaria I see five great principles. I am convinced that if we learn from these principles and practice them, we will experience results similar to those recorded by John when we are told concerning Christ's witness that many of the Samaritans "then... went out of the city, and came unto Him" (John 4:30).

The first great principle is: be a friend to those you are trying to win. Jesus showed Himself a friend to those who were lost. He is

described as having been a "friend of publicans and sinners." This (although intended critically) was good reporting. Jesus could have kept aloof from mankind Just as we can keep aloof. But He would have won nobody that way. Instead, Jesus came to the sick, lost, lonely, distressed, and perishing and moved among them as a friend. In this story we find Him in the woman's country, at the woman's city, sitting on the woman's well (verses 5-6).

There is an illustration of this basic fact about the Lord Jesus in one of the books by Watchman Nee, the Chinese evangelist. Nee had been talking to another Christian in his home. They were downstairs, as was his friend's son. The friend's wife and mother were in an upstairs room. All at once the little boy wanted something and called out to his mother for it. "It's up here," she said. "Come up and get it."

He cried out to her, "I can't, Mummy; it's such a long way. Please bring it down to me." He was very small. So the mother picked up what he wanted and brought it down to him. It is just that way with salvation. No one is able to meet his own need spiritually, but the Lord Jesus Christ came down to us so our need could be met. Nee writes, "Had He not come, sinners could not have approached Him; but He came down in order to lift them up."¹⁸

I wonder if you are like that in your witnessing? Do you keep aloof or do you go to those who need the gospel? Another way of asking the same thing is to ask whether or not you have contact with non-Christians socially. Do you go to their homes, sit in their kitchens, ask them their interests?

A great deal of our difficulty in this area comes from the fact that Christians have often looked at the world as if it would inevitably get them dirty if they should get into it. They have taken verses like 2 Corinthians 6:17 "Wherefore, come out from among them, and be ye separate" as meaning that Christians are to have no dealings with the world, rather than seeing that the words only have to do with avoiding conformity to the world, not isolation from it. Jesus did not teach isolation, and He did not practice it. He said in His great prayer for us recorded in John 17, "I pray not that thou shouldst

take them out of the world, but that thou shouldest keep them from the evil" (verse 15). When He departed for heaven He left His disciples in the world to evangelize it.

I am convinced that we need very practical ways of repeating Christ's obvious friendship with the lost in our own personal experience. For a start you might invite a number of non-Christian friends into your home for dinner. You might go to a concert with them. You might take in a sports event. Why not befriend your co-workers. Join a club, a choral society, a civic organization. It is not even a loss to go shopping together or invite your friends in for coffee. These are only beginning suggestions. If you are serious about taking the Gospel to the lost, the Lord will show you other fruitful avenues of getting to know non-Christians. Just remember: Take the initiative and be friendly.

Second, ask questions. It is never a bad move to ask questions. As we read the story of Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman we discover that this is precisely what He did, and that He did it at the very beginning of the conversation. He asked for a drink (John 4:7). Looking at the conversation from the outside, as we do look at it, this is almost amusing. The woman was the one with the needs; she had the real questions. Jesus was the one with the answers. Nevertheless, Jesus humbled Himself by asking her for a favor and so established an immediate and genuine point of contact.

Moreover, there were two very important consequences as the result of His asking the woman for something. First, He aroused her interest. Dale Carnegie reminds us in his very successful book, *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, that the voice any person likes to hear best is his own. Jesus got the woman of Samaria talking. Her talking put her in a good mood (perhaps even changed her mood if, indeed, she had arrived at the well shortly after being pushed off the path by Peter, as I believe may have been the case). Out of her good mood the woman then clearly developed a favorable interest in Jesus. She must have found herself thinking, "My what an interesting person this is! How polite! And what discrimination He must have to be interested in me!"

The second consequence of the Lord's asking her a question is that the woman found her curiosity aroused. He had asked her a question; she found it natural to begin to ask Him a series of questions. Here we should notice something quite interesting. In the report that we have in John 3 of Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus, the second sentence that Nicodemus is reported to have uttered begins "How?" It was a question. The very first word that the woman of Samaria uttered was "How?" Again it was a question. No doubt there were many differences between the two questions. Perhaps there were even different motives in asking them. The interesting point is that the two questions occurred. In both cases Jesus did not only get the one to whom He was witnessing talking. He got him or her asking questions. He then answered them. So should we if we are to be effective in telling others about Him.

Let me state this again in a slightly different way. People are always full of questions, many of them religious questions. If you can get them to express these questions through yourself asking questions, by the grace of God you have already accomplished a great deal in your witness and God will use the aroused interest to point the one asking the questions to Jesus. Paul Little has written correctly about provoking such questions: "Once the non-Christian takes the first step in initiative, all pressure goes out of any conversation about Jesus Christ." And he adds that thereafter "it can be picked up at the point where it is left without embarrassment."¹⁹

Third, offer something relevant. Jesus offered the woman something related quite directly to her need. In one sense the offer was always of Himself, of course. And yet, to aging Nicodemus Jesus spoke of Himself as One who offers new life, a new beginning. (John 3:3). He spoke of Himself as light to the man who had been born blind (John 9:5). To the woman the same offer was couched in the metaphor of water. He said, "Whosoever drinketh of this water shall thirst again; but whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst, but the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life" (John 4:13-14).

Most Christians need to learn from this principle. It will not do for us to witness about the transmission and reliability of the Bible if the person we are talking to is a girl who isn't interested in that but who is afraid she will end up an old maid if she becomes a Christian. We must share Christ's offer to guide our lives and enrich them in whatever way He leads us. It will not be much use for us to speak about the power of Jesus Christ to deliver a person from the grip of drugs or alcohol if the man we are speaking to is a disciplined scientist whose greatest hangup is his suspicion that other scientists have disproved Christianity. We need to offer him the challenge of searching the Scriptures himself to see whether these things are so and to encourage him to test Christ's claims. Above all we must not present our message in the language of the last century or in clichés that have no meaning to most of the non-Christian world.

Most people are thinking of their own needs. We must offer Jesus to them in ways that relate to those needs.

Fourth, stress the Good News. Show that the Gospel of Jesus Christ offers comfort. This does not mean, I am sure you realize, that we are to totally overlook sin. Jesus did not do that. He brought the woman to the point of recognizing her sin by His reference to the issue of her husbands. Nevertheless, even as He gently uncovered the sin. He offered comfort; for He coupled His inquiry into her marital status with the invitation to come again to Him (verse 16).

Unfortunately, it is true that we often do exactly the opposite in witnessing to non-Christians. The comfort of the Gospel is there but we forget the comfort in our zeal to expose (and, I am afraid, often condemn) the sin. For instance, imagine a situation in which a non-Christian offers a Christian a drink at a party. Aren't there thousands of Christians who would immediately reply, "No, thank you. I don't drink. I'm a Christian."? Then they think that they have offered a splendid witness to Jesus Christ when actually they had only succeeded in condemning the non-Christian. At the same time they would have given him the wrong idea that non-drinking is somehow a very important part of Christianity. Oh, we may think that non-drinking is an important part of our Christian life. It may be so in our

case. But the point I am making is that the statement "I don't drink; I'm a Christian" is no more intelligible to the non-Christian than his saying to you, when you ask him to go to a football game, "No thanks. I don't go to football games. I'm a non-Christian."

There are two real dangers in all of this. The first is the danger that in getting our witness tangled up in such issues we miss the fact that our friend may be quite desperately lonely—perhaps that is why he drinks—and never suggest a cure for his loneliness. Or we may miss his feeling of great guilt, sorrow, meaninglessness, or whatever it may be.

The second danger is that in focusing attention on some aspect of the non-believer's conduct we may actually give the impression that he must improve himself before he can come to Jesus. This is quite wrong. We will never want to give the impression that when we come to Jesus we can do as we please, that we can sin that grace might abound. That would be untrue also. But neither do we want to suggest that there must be self reformation before a man or a woman can come.

In England, in the early part of the nineteenth century, there was a woman who had heard the Gospel but who had never been able to respond to it personally. She had come from a Christian home. She understood the faith. But still she could not come. She considered herself unworthy. One day she wandered into a very small church and sat down in the back. She was almost in despair and hardly heard the words of the elderly man who was speaking. Suddenly, right in the middle of his address, the preacher stopped and pointing his finger at her said, "You Miss, sitting there at the back, you can be saved now. You don't need to do anything!" His words struck like thunder in her heart. She believed at once, and with her belief there came an unimagined sense of peace and real joy. That night Charlotte Elliott went home and wrote the well known hymn:

*Just as I am, without one plea
But that thy blood was shed for me,
And that thou bidd'st me come to thee,
O Lamb of God, I come.*²⁰

If we are to witness for Jesus Christ we must never give the impression that a man must first become worthy of the Gospel. We must not forget that there is comfort in the Gospel for sinners.

The fifth principle is to confront the individual with his responsibility to decide for or against Jesus Christ. Jesus told the woman at the well that He was the Messiah (John 4:26). Well, was He or wasn't He? This was the decision placed before the woman. It must be the same in our witnessing. If we do not get to the point of focusing on Jesus Himself, our witness is incomplete. It is not yet a full witness. And if we do not get to the point of showing that a decision is necessary, our witness is inadequate.

These are the principles of how we should tell others about Jesus Christ, taken from the story of Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman. First, be friendly. Second, ask questions. Third, offer that which most suits the individual's needs. Fourth, stress the Good News. And fifth, show that the person must decide either for or against the Lord Jesus.

What will happen if you do that? I believe that the results will be similar to those that Jesus experienced in Samaria. The first obvious results were in the life of the woman. About midway through the conversation the woman acknowledged her need, saying, "Give me this water, that I thirst not" (John 4:15). A few moments later she confessed her sin, "I have no husband" (John 4:17). Third, she began to show a quickening of spiritual intelligence: "I perceive that thou art a prophet" (John 4:19). Fourth, she affirmed her faith in the Lord Jesus: "Is not this the Christ" (John 4:29). Also, she took the good news that she had received to her town.

I know you may think that the people among whom you work or with whom you associate may be difficult specimens to speak to. That may be true. So was the Samaritan woman. And yet, she became the first great witness after John the Baptist. It may be that God will use your witness to reach one who in his turn may evangelize an entire generation.

NOTES

1. The original interview may be found online at www.placefortruth.org/blog/sufficiency-scripture-podcast.

2. Jonathan Master (Ph.D., University of Aberdeen) is professor of theology and dean of the School of Divinity at Cairn University. He is also director of Cairn's Center for University Studies. Dr. Master serves as the editorial director of the Alliance and co-host of the Theology on the Go podcast.

3. Scott Oliphint (PhD, Westminster Theological Seminary) is dean of faculty and professor of apologetics and systematic theology at Westminster Theological Seminary. Dr. Oliphint's works include *Reasons for Faith*, *Covenantal Apologetics*, *The Battle Belongs to the Lord*, and *God with Us*. He is also an ordained minister in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.

4. Michael Roberts (DTh, University of South Africa) is the Alliance editor of ThinkandActBiblically.org.

5. Jeffrey Stivason (Ph.D., Westminster Theological Seminary) is the pastor of Grace Reformed Presbyterian Church in Gibsonia, PA, and editor at Place for Truth. He has been serving the Lord as a minister of the Gospel since 1995 and has planted two churches during that time.

6. Grant Van Leuven has been feeding the flock at the Puritan Evangelical Church of America in San Diego, CA, since 2010. A widower, he is the adoring father of his four covenant children: Rachel, Olivia, Abraham, and Isaac. He earned his M.Div. at the Reformed Presbyterian Theological Seminary in Pittsburgh, PA.

7. This is not to rule out helpful tools such as the *reductio ad absurdum*. As apologetic instructor Greg Koukl from Stand to Reason Ministries points out, Christians too often let others off the hook of their burden to prove their own assertions against the Bible and Christianity; to benefit from his "Columbo" guidance, see his "Tactics in Defending the Faith" lectures.

8. Greg Bahnsen, *Van Til's Apologetic: Readings & Analysis* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R Publishing, 1998), 199.

9. Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 147.

10. Gordon H. Clark, *God's Hammer: The Bible And Its Critics*, 2nd ed. (Jefferson, Md.: The Trinity Foundation, 1987) , 2. See Scripture references for WCF 1:4, such as 1 Thess. 2:13; 2 Tim. 3:16; and 2 Pet. 1:21. Clark next highlights how Scripture never contradicts itself (that is, it has no inconsistencies) as the second most important apologetic for divine inspiration, veracity, and authority; WCF 1:5 speaks of this as "the consent of all the parts".

11. *Ibid.*, 125.

12. Reymond, 143.

14. See section 1:1 of The Second Helvetic Confession and Article 5 of The Belgic Confession in *Reformed Confessions Harmonized*, eds. Joel R. Beeke and Sinclair B. Ferguson (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999) , 10-14.

15. Gordon H. Clark, *Religion, Reason and Revelation* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1961) , 111, 135.

16. Reymond, 140, 146.

17. James Montgomery Boice (1938-2000) was the pastor of Philadelphia's historic Tenth Presbyterian Church (1968-2000). He founded the Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals in 1994. He served as an assistant editor of *Christianity Today* in Washington, D.C., from 1966-1968, and as editor of *Eternity* from 1985-1989. James Montgomery Boice's Bible teaching continues on The Bible Study Hour radio and Internet program, preparing you to think and act biblically.

18. Watchman Nee, *What Shall This Man Do?* (London: Victory Press, 1962), page 37.

19. Paul E. Little, *How to Give Away Your Faith* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1966), page 36.

20. "Just As I Am" Words: Charlotte Elliott, 1835; first appeared in *The Christian Remembrancer*. Music: Woodworth, William B. Bradbury, Mendelssohn Collection, or Third Book of Psalmody (New York: 1849)

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