

SMASH-MOUTH APOLOGETICS VERSUS GRACE-FILLED PERSUASION¹

By Glen G. Scorgie, Ph.D (St. Andrews)
Professor of Theology, Bethel Seminary San Diego

“And the Lord’s servant must not be quarrelsome but must be kind to everyone”
(2 Tim. 2:24-25)

It happened back in the early 70s, but I can remember the scene like it was yesterday. We were a small group of young Christian students—all guys—walking through the student union on the university campus. Various organizations had display tables on either side of a long hallway, competing for the attention of passers-by. I decided to stop at the Communists’ table and challenge the students sitting there. We promptly got into debate over the existence of God and stuff like that, and I’ll admit that I was performing a bit to impress my Christian friends. One Communist and I were getting louder and more confrontational. I can vaguely recall pounding their little table with my fist, and then things really got out of hand. The situation was rapidly escalating toward a physical fight, with some shoving and pushing, and bystanders had to pull us apart like referees at a hockey game. I was still shouting over my shoulder as embarrassed friends escorted me away.

I was guilty of smash-mouth apologetics, and that day I learned first-hand how such an approach intensifies (quite unhelpfully, I might add) the adversarial nature of an apologetic encounter. It took me awhile to cool down, and afterwards I got to thinking: What exactly happened back there in the student union? How could I have gotten so worked up? Did I honestly think a performance like that would help the cause of Christ?

That’s when I started thinking about *how* we do apologetics—how we go about defending and commending the Christian faith. I knew then, and I’m still convinced, that the substance of our apologetic message is crucially important. Make no mistake—our content matters. There’s no place for muddle-headedness, or spineless compromise. Where it is appropriate we should be able to make our points vigorously and forcefully. Our opponents should be crystal-clear on what we believe, and why we are convinced it is true. At the same time, however, and this is what my negative experience back at the university showed me, *how* we engage in apologetics—how we relate to our conversation partners—also matters a great deal. We need to be known for our grace-filled persuasion.

UNDERSTANDING THE TIMES

If we are going to be effective as apologists, we need to be in tune with the times—not in a compromising way, of course, but in the sense of being astutely aware of

¹ This paper was first delivered at the “Reasonable Faith in an Uncertain World” Conference, sponsored by the Evangelical Philosophical Society in November 2007 in San Diego, California.

what we are up against and the new environment we are in. People have always bristled when others have tried to impose their wills on them, or attempted to jam something down their throats. That's nothing new. But people nowadays are *especially* sensitive toward any exercises of power. People living now, in the sunset years of modernity, feel they have already endured enough at the hands of powerful people and institutions. They are very guarded against any more aggressive intrusions into their lives.

The French postmodern philosopher Michel Foucault proposed that the core attitude of the emerging world order was a deeply-ingrained suspicion of power in whatever forms it might take. He maintained that in a world in which ultimate reality was unknowable, all truth claims about such ultimate reality had to be spurious, and in fact thinly-disguised attempts to manipulate others for our own advantage.² Foucault did not invent this way of seeing matters, nor did he single-handedly invent this disposition of suspicion toward people who claim they have truth someone else needs to accept. He has been popular and influential because he provided an articulate expression of the way many—especially young people—feel today. A good segment of the population today have red alerts go off in their heads whenever a Christian apologist starts speaking or behaving aggressively. That's just the way things are. That's the new reality.

The contemporary situation is also characterized by a longing for authentic relationships. The human spirit cries out against the dehumanizing and depersonalizing impact of so much of the modern way of life. "Failure to sustain the personal," notes James Houston, emeritus professor of spiritual theology at Regent College, "is the worst feature of modern life."³ Indeed, he continues, "an insufficient personal life is the affliction of most people today."⁴ Even some Christians are bowing out of participation in certain large, program-driven churches because of their inability to establish deep, authentic relationships within these huge structures. They drift away with their feelings of profound loneliness left unhealed.

Human beings are image-bearers of a triune, intrinsically relational God. We were created for community, but our sin has produced alienation. Christ, by his Spirit, is restoring believers to intimacy with God and others. We should be using every opportunity, including our apologetic encounters, to highlight authentic relationships and offer a countercultural alternative to the detached, manipulative and impersonal ways of the world. For James Houston is right: "The prime action of our lives is the face-to-face encounter with others."⁵

RELATIVE INATTENTION TO HOW

It is interesting how little attention is paid to this in our training for, and practice of, Christian apologetics. We are sensitive to interpersonal dynamics when it comes to evangelism, but our unspoken assumption is that apologetics is purely about ideas and

² Stanley Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 123-138.

³ Houston, *Joyful Exiles* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2006), 105.

⁴ *Ibid.* 113.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 177.

arguments and competing ideologies. If we offend someone by our aggressive tone, we're likely to say, like the raspy old mobster Don Corleone in the classic *Godfather* movies, after unleashing violence and murder on his enemies, "It's not personal; it's just business." But in fact apologetics is not just about competing ideas. It is about ideas and convictions that are held by real *people* who not only think but remember and struggle and feel things deeply.

Browse the important apologetics reference works and you'll find virtually nothing about an appropriately Christian way of engaging people in apologetic discussion. Take, for example, the *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Ethics* (1999). Nothing in the entire volume addresses the appropriate relational style or tone of our apologetic efforts. Consider as well the *New Dictionary of Christian Apologetics* (2006). The story is the same there—no reference to attitude or tone of the apologist, even in its extended article on approaches to apologetics.

A notable exception to this pattern is David Clark's *Dialogical Apologetics: A Person-Centered Approach to Christian Ethics* (1993). Clark is an accomplished apologist and long-time member of the Evangelical Philosophical Society. His main idea is that "every assessment for the case for Christianity is made by real people who have unique agendas firmly in place."⁶ Effective apologetics, he argues, must be conducted as though people really mattered. It is an Enlightenment fallacy that humans are just brains on legs, and that everything else (emotions, will, intuition) can be bracketed for the sake of rational discourse. Effective apologetics requires a capacity for entering into the situation-in-life of our conversation partners—being able to understand how ego-invested we all are in the positions we espouse, and how very difficult it is to change something as internally metastasized as a worldview. In bringing this up, Clark is rather an exception to the rule among evangelical apologists. But we move closer to grace-filled persuasion when we approach the apologetic task with people in mind.

THE BIBLICAL BLEND

It is interesting to contrast our relative inattention to interpersonal tone to the emphasis Scripture gives to it. We are all familiar with the Apostle Peter's challenge to "always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have" (1 Pet. 3:15). Many are less familiar with his cautionary next sentence: "But do this with gentleness and respect." For Peter, it is obvious that the content and the relational tone of Christian apologetic witness are *both* important. Our reasons are important, but so are gentleness and respect.

Likewise the Apostle Paul, who had such great confidence in the transforming power of truth, urges the believers in Ephesus to counter falsehood and deception by speaking the truth into darkness—but more specifically, to speak the truth *in love* (Eph. 4:15). The proclamation of truth is not enough, he is saying—it must be truth wrapped in love, and it really helps when the love is recognizable as such to the hearer.

⁶ David Clark, *Dialogical Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), viii.

For further confirmation of this biblical combination, we need only consider Paul’s admonition to Timothy: “And the Lord’s servant must not be quarrelsome but must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful. Opponents must be gently instructed, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth” (2 Tim. 2:24-25). There they are again—not quarrelsome, kind, not resentful, gentle—virtues, positive character traits, fruits of the Spirit, actually, and Paul the great apologist says these are not to be omitted when we defend and commend the faith. We are not to practice smash-mouth apologetics (like I attempted with the young Communist years ago) but instead we are to practice grace-filled persuasion.⁷

THE POLAR OPPOSITES

Let’s take just a moment to clarify what we mean by these two alternatives competing for our allegiance. The first option, and I am caricaturing it for emphasis, is smash-mouth apologetics. Smash-mouth football is a no-nonsense, aggressive, sometimes-violent, play-to-win approach to the game. It is a forearm to the chops, war in the trenches, run up the score if you can. If we move from sports to government we find something similar. Smash-mouth politics is about doing whatever it takes to win. And smash-mouth apologetics is similar to both of these—a hard-nosed, in-your-face determination to dismantle the positions of unbelievers, expose their illogical or untenable nature, and ensure that truth triumphs. It is relatively indifferent to who gets run over or coerced—who gets shamed or humiliated—in the process.

At the opposite end of the spectrum is what I have called grace-filled persuasion. The perception is out there that grace-filled persuasion is for weak, muddle-headed apologists who can’t reason in a straight line. The perception is also out there that grace-filled persuasion is only practiced by timid or intimidated Christians. But in fact grace-filled persuasion is grounded in clear-headed, fearless confidence in Christ and the truths of the Christian faith. Its distinctive characteristics are, first of all, that it is people-centered. It proceeds as though people, and not just ideas, matter. It never forgets that persuasion always occurs in a relational context, even if it is something as detached as the relationship between an author and a reader.

Second, grace-filled persuasion understands that effective apologetic persuasion must address people holistically. It takes into consideration *all* aspects of the person with whom we are conversing—not just their mind, but also their feelings, perceptions, values and historical experiences as well. God has created them, like us, as psychosomatic unities, and we need to treat others accordingly. To assume that only their cognitive processes matter, or that these processes can be disconnected from other personal and relational dynamics, is simply naïve.

And thirdly, grace-filled persuasion is integrated in that it seeks not only to convey truth about Christ and his gospel, but to do so in a manner that echoes the interpersonal example of Christ himself. In Jesus, the Apostle John testified, we have

⁷ *Newsweek* noted in its 4 July 2005 issue (p. 30) that “Billy Graham is blessed with the ability to profess an unflinching creed with a welcoming warmth.”

witnessed the *convergence* of grace and truth—not one *or* the other, but both in perfect harmony (John 1:17). In the incarnation, the revelation of God’s truth was embodied in a person. That is still God’s most effective way of communicating—when truth is not just proclaimed, but also embodied. Christ’s blending of grace and truth stands as the ideal for us in all our life and work, including our apologetic efforts. Even our apologetic duties fall within the locus of a spirituality of likeness to Christ. It may be time for us to think about the spirituality of apologetics—what it means to live all of life, including our apologetic efforts, before God in the presence of his Holy Spirit.

BATTLE TACTICS FOR A UNIQUE WAR

But, some may counter, aren’t we in a battle—a spiritual battle, to be sure, but a battle nonetheless? Isn’t it appropriate to think of ourselves as in a battle for the mind against a hostile enemy, and to conduct ourselves therefore in a militant manner when it comes to apologetics? After all, did Paul not say, “We have divine power to *demolish* strongholds. We *demolish* arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we *take captive* every thought to make it obedient to Christ” (2 Cor. 10:5)? This is warfare imagery. Demolition and taking prisoners certainly does sound militant, and Paul is making the point that as an apostle the Corinthians will not find him a spineless pushover. Nevertheless he says that it is “by the meekness and gentleness of Christ” that he appeals to them (v 1). And he clarifies that the weapons he fights with, and the way he goes about fighting, are both unconventional. Our weapons, he says, “are not the weapons of the world,” and “we do not wage war as the world does” (vss 3-4).

Again in Ephesians Paul emphasizes that Christians are to engage in spiritual warfare. We are in a battle, he says, and we need to armor-up in order to resist the devil’s schemes. But then he adds, as before: “Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world” (Eph. 6:11-13). We could easily interpret what he says here literally, and take, for example, his image of wielding the sword of the Word as justification for at least verbal aggression against unbelievers. But we are stopped up short when we discover a couple of verses later that our chief weapon is to be prayer! This is a long ways from the way I was engaging those young Communists.

What are we to make of the undeniably militant imagery used in Scripture? I am convinced that it is intended to remind us that we cannot coast leisurely to the finish line. We are caught up in a cosmic conflict, and the stakes are very high—of eternal proportions, in fact. Christians are not to live casually or become preoccupied with trivial pursuits. We must behave like soldiers—conducting ourselves with courage, submission to authority, constant alertness and resilient determination. But the comparison to human warfare is not an absolute one. It also breaks down at this point, because we must never employ such normal wartime tactics as intimidation, violence, coercion, control and humiliation.⁸

⁸ John Howard Yoder, in *The Politics of Jesus* (1994), argues that Jesus calls us to live radical lives that stand out from the status quo of the unconverted, power-based social order.

I have been thinking about what it would take for us to move away from smash-mouth apologetics (an approach we all recognize and many of us, like me, too often have practiced), and move toward grace-filled persuasion. And I've come to the conclusion that it may simply require that we conduct our apologetics in a manner consistent with what we already believe about ourselves, our conversation partners, and about God himself. Yet these truths to which we so readily give cognitive assent must penetrate deeply into our souls and alter the default settings of our psyches.

UNDERSTANDING OURSELVES

We can progress toward grace-filled persuasion by getting hold of some central biblical truths about *ourselves*. It is quite natural that we should think of ourselves as the “good guys” and our apologetic opponents as the “bad guys.” We are regenerate and they are unregenerate. We are the children of God who have seen the light, and they are the children of this world who remain in darkness. But the Apostle John warns us against such a false sense of personal righteousness and superiority. If we think we are all pure and beyond sinning, we deceive ourselves (1 John 1:9). It is more truthful to acknowledge that the strain of sin cuts right through both the Christians and non-Christian populations. Christians are forgiven and regenerate, but we remain sinners nonetheless. And this means that our own ego needs influence how we respond to others in apologetic encounters. We like winning and hate losing just as much as the next person. Our competitiveness can show through in our apologetics, especially when things may appear to be going badly for us. We engage in apologetics for God's glory, but we are never totally free from a desire for at least a bit of the glory to be directed our way.

We also have insecurities—especially if we are willing to face the evidence honestly—and need assurance at various points that the Christian faith really is bedrock reliable. So when a debate or conversation is not going our way, we get a bit defensive and even testy. Our inward anxiety can bring out the worst in us, and leave our conversation partners with a bad memory of how we behaved.

We seldom start out an apologetic encounter in the smash-mouth style. We grow into it. Tim Stafford, a senior writer for *Christianity Today*, recently published a book about the Christian social activists who helped to transform America through causes like the abolition of slavery, women's suffrage, prohibition of alcohol, and the civil rights movement led by Martin Luther King, Jr. The book is entitled, appropriately enough, *Shaking the System* (2006). Almost all of these movements, at one time or another, developed strains of violence. Stafford ponders why a minority of Christian activists eventually chose this option. And he concludes that it grew out of their sense of outrage, frustration and impatience with the direction things were going. It is an understandable human response, and a bit of this can intrude into the spirits of Christian apologists who find themselves up against a hostile and stubbornly-resistant spirit of the times.

And there is a related factor. Take, for example, someone who has a life-long ministry to cults. Have you noticed how, over time, they can start to sound a bit like a

cult members themselves? Or consider this example. If a soldier has to fight the Taliban at close quarters for long periods of time, the risk is that they will begin to behave more and more like them. The principle is that we tend to absorb something of the tactics and tone of our opponents. In the sphere of apologetics this can be disastrous.

Our knowledge never corresponds perfectly to the absolute but veiled reality known only by God himself. The Apostle Paul spoke for all of us when he admitted that on this side of eternity we know only partially (1 Cor. 13:12). Our God-given faith, reinforced in our souls through the assuring work of the Spirit, does not produce absolute, mathematical certitude. Otherwise faith could be discontinued. Rather it creates, to use Lesslie Newbigin's fine phrase, *proper confidence*.⁹ This view of things gives us permission to be honest and authentic about the limits of our personal knowledge, which can in turn produce an appropriate humility. And this in turn mellows our smash-mouth tendencies.

UNDERSTANDING OTHERS

We can also make progress toward grace-filled persuasion by remembering the truth Scripture reveals about *others*. It shows us right up-front in the book of Genesis that human beings are image-bearers of God (1:26-27). Even human being possesses such a degree of God-likeness that they are always deserving of our *respect*. Consequently, there is no place in our apologetic endeavors for sarcasm, mockery, unfair generalizations, caricaturing, put-downs, shaming or humiliation. To engage in any of these behaviors, however tempting they may be in the heat of the debate, is to contradict what Scripture reveals and we believe about all human beings.

Moreover, to be an image-bearer is to be a free moral agent. All humans are designed to choose freely for or against the truth, and then, of course, to bear responsibility for their choices. It violates this characteristic of human beings to muscle, pressure or coerce them into giving assent to a particular truth claim. Besides, the work of the Spirit never requires that people be intimidated or belittled.

We will view people as individuals in whose lives God's Spirit is already actively at work. It is our task to cooperate with God's prior and ongoing work, rather than to think of ourselves as starting in from scratch. For this reason, and others, it is important to listen to the stories and experiences that have led our conversation partners to believe as they do. We will find the difference between them and us is not such a wide chasm after all. We share a common humanity, and some of their insights from reason and experience will be worthy of affirmation or at least respect.

Gentleness comes too when we realize how ego-invested we are in the positions we espouse, and how difficult it is for any of us to change something as foundational as our worldview. We would find it incredibly difficult to relinquish our Christian faith, yet essentially we are asking our conversation partner to undergo an equally-convulsive

⁹ Lesslie Newbigin, *Proper Confidence: Faith, Doubt & Certainty in Christian Discipleship* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995).

paradigm shift. If we are truly empathetic, we will appreciate the magnitude of what we are seeking and not be too impatient with them.

There is one other thing here, and it is huge. Seekers are on the lookout for people whose message *resonates authentically* with their manner and way of life. We are designed as psychosomatic unities—complex holistic beings—and we do not find mere arguments or ideas compelling. People are looking for, and respond best to, holistically-compelling witness. And so our duty is to witness to the truth *by articulating* it in our speech while *demonstrating* it in our living and ways of relating.

UNDERSTANDING GOD

Finally, we can make progress by getting hold of some central *truths about God*. Your opponents, Paul advised Timothy, must be instructed gently, “in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth” (2 Tim. 2:24-25). Paul is pointing out that a faith response to truth will ultimately require an intervention by God. And the verse seems to suggest that knowing this—that by his Spirit God is currently active as a revealer of truth—makes us gentler in the way we instruct (and by implication, also in the way we argue, debate and reason with others). The logical link is that we can afford to be gentler because we know that the final outcome is not entirely dependent on what we do and say. Ultimately the burden of convincing another does not rest on our shoulders. Knowing this helps us stay more relaxed and remain, well, more *human*. Faith requires a miracle—a work of God’s grace. We cannot argue anyone into the kingdom. Spiritual illumination is God’s work. It cannot be produced by the cleverest apologist, for only God can change the disposition of the heart.

Richard Mouw’s little book *Uncommon Decency: Christian Civility in an Uncivil World* (1992), has profoundly affected me. The author, who is also president of Fuller Seminary and a Christian philosopher, mourns the decline of decency and civility in our culture, and calls for Christians to become known for their counter-cultural grace toward others. He notes that many disciples seek to defend Christ, and faith in him, in ways and with attitudes that are quite at odds with the spirit of Jesus. The defenders of Christ are all too often glaringly unlike Christ.

How do we explain such an irony? Mouw suggests that some contemporary defenders of the faith earn reputations for being mean-spirited and shrill because inside they are running scared. They are afraid that the faith is in decline, and they must save it—even if it requires acting out of character. Their fear and defensiveness makes them behave in unattractive ways, and conduct themselves in a manner that does not commend faith in Christ. Mouw proposes that the solution to Christian incivility is to trust God more to accomplish his goals through us without us having to be unduly anxious or panic-struck.¹⁰

¹⁰ Compare J. I. Packer, *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1961).

EMPATHY AND EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

A landmark work in human psychology is Daniel Goleman's *Emotional Intelligence* (1995). In it he defined emotional intelligence as the capacity to sense and respond to the unspoken emotional climate of groups and individuals. This relatively neglected competency is actually crucial to human life and relations. He pointed out that information taken from the outside world for processing in the brain must first pass physiologically through our limbic system, which happens to be the seat of our emotions. If some situation or experience feels wrong emotionally, then, incoming data will get bogged down in our feelings and fail to proceed on into our "mental workspace" for reflection and storage. Sensitive emotions hug close to our reasoning processes, so that human relational dynamics are often decisive in aiding or preventing cognitive apprehension and change.

A flurry of sequels by Goleman and others have applied these central insights to diverse fields of human endeavor. For example, he, with others, has more recently written *Primal Leadership: Realizing the Potential of Emotional Intelligence* (2002). This latter book brilliantly chronicles the secular discovery of the relational matrix of effective leadership. Perhaps more than anything else, it argues, effective leaders are those who are able to recognize and shape the emotional tenor of a group. But this requires a skill not all have—the capacity for empathy and identification with the other—the ability to see and experience life through the eyes of someone else.

Last year I had lunch with a seminary leader in Hong Kong, and we were reflecting on this very matter. He estimated that in the overwhelming majority of Asia cases of pastoral resignation or failure the cause was neither moral lapse nor doctrinal error. Almost always it shook down to deficiencies in emotional intelligence—that is, to doing relationships poorly or insensitively.¹¹ I suspect that much the same could be said when it comes to apologetics in this country.

A great secret to effective communication, including persuasion, is the ability to see an issue through the eyes of the other person. We are talking about the ability to move outside of one's self, and in our mind and heart to enter into the space of our dialogue partner. Put simply, effective communication calls for *empathy*—the power to project one's personality into the experience and perspective of someone else in order to comprehend it more fully. Empathy is the opposite of narcissism, and an essential element of love. It should, therefore, characterize Christians, at least the more mature and Christ-like ones among us. It is certainly an ability and sensitivity that the Holy Spirit seeks to cultivate in believers. It would be a very good idea for all of us to cultivate this quality with disciplined intent.

THE RATIONALE FOR GRACE-FILLED PERSUASION

Our natural predisposition is toward high-testosterone aggressiveness in apologetics, toward what we have called smash-mouth apologetics. We all have a deep-

¹¹ See Peter Scazzero, *The Emotionally-Healthy Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003).

seated need to win that may be stronger on occasion than our concern for the welfare of our dialogue partners. Apologetic encounters trigger something deeply competitive in us—from the outside looking inward, it appears sometimes that human beings really may be driven by the jungle law of the survival of the fittest. As followers of Christ, we gravitate toward the story of him cleansing the temple with a whip, and would prefer to pattern our apologetic strategies after that. We are less drawn to the profile of Christ as one who did not break a bruised reed or snuff out a smoldering wick (Matt. 12:20), but was “gentle and humble in heart” (Matt. 11:29). But we have to ask ourselves honestly: which of these depictions of Jesus more accurately represents the overall tone and tenor of Jesus’ life and ministry, and his response to conventional approaches to power? And I think, if we are honest, we will admit that it is the latter.

Jesus exemplified a grace-filled approach to persuasion—one that focused on people rather than strictly ideological concepts. As his disciples we are obligated to follow his example. It is a simple matter of obedience. But as we reflect on this example, we begin also to understand something of the underlying rationale for it. Consider the life and ministry of Bartolomé de las Casas (1474-1566), a younger contemporary of Christopher Columbus, and a Spanish noble (and later Dominican priest) who spent his life shuttling between the recently-discovered New World and the royal court back in Spain. There he tirelessly spoke out against ongoing Spanish genocide of the native Indians of Latin America, and pointed out the troubling fact that those that survived were forced, at the point of the sword, to convert or else.

De las Casas’ famous book, *The Only Way to Draw All People to a Living Faith*, sensitized the conscience of the Roman Catholic Church, and prompted protective legislation by the Spanish crown on how Indians were to be treated. He fought an uphill battle to get the Spanish powers to stop destroying the native people, and to allow them to live with human dignity and freedom. Before the Spanish court he successfully argued two main theses: that “the Indians were not inferior, and conquest was not a Christian means of conversion.” Rather, he insisted, “the gift of faith must be offered as Christ has commanded, with gentleness, with love, and with full respect.”¹² De las Casas consequently advised preachers to “address audiences, especially non-Christian, with modesty and respect. They should create a climate of kindness and calm and graciousness so that their hearers would want to listen and would have a greater respect for the message.”¹³

You may be thinking it is really “over the top” to drag an illustration involving genocide into a paper on apologetics. No apologist in their right mind today is advocating the *killing* of those who reject our arguments. This is all true and fair enough. But I introduce this story of a non-coercive approach to evangelism because of the rationale this famous priest offered in defense of the grace-filled method he recommended. In his own words, the one and only acceptable way to teach the Christian faith to anyone is “a way that wins the mind with reasons” *and* “wins the will with gentleness, with

¹² Helen Rand Parrish, intro. to Bartolomé de las Casas, *The Only Way* (New York & Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1992), 47, 53.

¹³ Bartolomé de las Casas, *The Only Way*, 104.

invitation.”¹⁴ Almost 500 years ago Bartholome de las Casas understood that Christian appeals should be made in a way that invites people to respond positively with both their God-given reason and their God-given voluntary will. To this day, de las Casas is revered in Latin America as a winsome contrast to the Spanish conquistadors.

Human beings do not take ownership of views that are *imposed* by someone on the outside. They may temporarily acquiesce to an aggressive or intimidating individual, but they will never deeply internalize the convictions of such a person unless they are allowed first to freely embrace them as their own. The dynamics of power in apologetic arguments create winners and losers, but they cannot generate ownership. When the personality and presence of the Christian apologist are characterized by grace and patience, the dialogue partner feels free to absorb truths without compulsion and on their own schedule. An atmosphere of intimidation or belittling erects barriers to the adoption of the views of the hostile other. De las Casas quoted a tradition that James the Greater once said: “God wishes no one converted against his will.”¹⁵ A gentle approach encourages opponents to relax their defensiveness and embrace the truth as their own.

WHEN THE MEDIUM MATCHES THE MESSAGE

We offer one final consideration in support of ensuring that the tone of our apologetic discourse is consistent with the content of our message. For a long time in Western thinking a big thick line was drawn between a message (propositional content) and the medium through which it was delivered. One message could be delivered in Spanish or in English, in print or on the radio, but those were mere differences in how it was delivered—or so it was thought. But in fact oral communication allows much more nuance than print does. Whether you shout words, or recite them calmly, actually alters the message itself by adding emotional content, and so does voice inflection and which words we choose to emphasize. Then TV came along, and people realized even more clearly that the medium profoundly affected the message itself. That’s when communications guru Marshall McLuhan came up with his famous dictum that the medium *is* the message.

There’s little new under the sun, and it appears that this late-breaking insight of McLuhan’s was already well-known by the New Testament writers and by Jesus himself. They understood that witness is most effective and convincing when the *way* we communicate is consistent with, or resonates with, *what* we are communicating.

For one thing, it rings truer. Imagine if you are listening to a compelling preacher expound the Word, who for some reason keeps declaring every few minutes that the Holocaust is a hoax. His anti-Semitic rant discredits everything else he says, even though everything else he is saying seems grounded in solid biblical exegesis. Suppose you are at a funeral, and the only organist the family of the deceased was able to find on short notice was from the local ballpark. Imagine if the hymns sung during the funeral service were to the tune of “YMCA” (complete with arm motions), or the organist kept trying to “pump

¹⁴ Ibid., 68.

¹⁵ Ibid., 103.

up” grieving relatives with “Duh-duh-duh-DUT-ta-duh—Charge!” No doubt everyone would be greatly offended, because this form of music is inappropriate for conveying the substance of grief and loss. We do not eat a great banquet, under crystal chandeliers and linen tablecloths, out of dog dishes. A picture and its frame should match. We know from the field of aesthetics that beauty requires a *harmony* of form and content. And so it must also be in our apologetics.

Postmodern thinkers, and the younger generation influenced by them, are instinctively suspicious of anyone who makes sweeping truth-claims. They are unimpressed by rational arguments because they doubt the efficacy of reason to get a person to the truth. So what criteria do they use to determine whether a person with a message or argument should be trusted? Very frequently the test is whether or not there is seamless consistency between a person’s message, the tone of their remarks, and the conduct with which they back up their assertions. If there is dissonance between any of these variables, any inconsistency or incongruity, then postmoderns will be quick to dismiss the claims of the individual as bogus. The upward climb to plausibility begins for postmodern people with evidence of sincerity. Evangelical apologist John Stackhouse, Jr. warns against excessive reliance on “logocentric” apologetics—that is, on apologetic approaches that are primary, even exclusively, word-driven. Like the incarnation itself, the best approach must be an embodied proclamation, one in which words of truth are “enfleshed” in appropriate actions and attitudes.¹⁶

CONCLUSION

We must be attentive to both our message *and* how we communicate it. Grace-filled persuasion can flourish as Christian apologists are willing to respect the intensified and pervasive contemporary suspicion of aggressiveness in all its overt and more subtle forms. Such aggressiveness is usually a product of the flesh rather than the Spirit, driven more by the apologist’s need to win than by concern for the unbeliever. The biblical ideal for apologetics blends truth-telling with love, reasoned defense with gentleness and respect. It helps to remember that faith is created ultimately by a mystic miracle—a work of God’s grace—and we cannot argue anyone into the kingdom. The work of the Spirit never requires intimidation or belittling of others—indeed, it is thwarted by these things.

The apologetic enterprise involves ideas, but it is also profoundly relational. The great challenge before us as Christian apologists is to speak and live in ways that combine uncompromising faithfulness to revealed truth with a grace-filled spirit of loving service and uncommon civility. For as the Scriptures say, the Lord’s servant must not be quarrelsome but must be kind to everyone. Grace-filled persuasion always trumps smash-mouth apologetics. This is the Christ-like way, and besides that, it is the way that works best in the end.

¹⁶ John Stackhouse, Jr., *Humble Apologetics* (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), chap. 8.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Casas, Bartolomé de las. *The Only Way*, ed. by Helen Rand Parish, trans. by Francis P. Sullivan. New York & Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1992.
- Clark, David K. *Dialogical Apologetics: A Person-Centered Approach to Christian Apologetics*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993.
- Goleman, Daniel. *Emotional Intelligence*. New York: Bantam, 1995.
- Goleman, Daniel. *Primal Leadership: Realizing the Potential of Emotional Intelligence*. Boston: Harvard Business School Review, 2002.
- Grenz, Stanley. *A Primer on Postmodernism*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996.
- Houston, James. *Joyful Exiles*. Downers Grove: IVP, 2006.
- Mouw, Richard. *Uncommon Decency: Christian Civility in an Uncivil World*. Downers Grove: IVP, 1992.
- Newbigin, Lesslie. *Proper Confidence: Faith, Doubt & Certainty in Christian Discipleship*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995.
- Packer, J. I. *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God*. Downers Grove: IVP, 1961.
- Scazzero, Peter. *The Emotionally-Healthy Church*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003.
- Stackhouse, John, Jr. *Humble Apologetics: Defending the Faith Today*. New York & Oxford: OUP, 2002.
- Stafford, Tim. *Shaking the System*. Downers Grove: IVP, 2006.
- Yoder, John Howard. *The Politics of Jesus*, 2d ed. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994.

rev. 25 Nov 07