

DO YOU BELIEVE?  
A BOOK SERIES FROM RATIO CHRISTI

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# H.E.A.R.T. OF SPIRITUAL DIALOGUE

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 RATIO  
CHRISTI

**FAITH & REASON** are at odds in our culture. For many, faith has come to mean little more than wishful thinking and blind belief. Such a concept is completely foreign to the pages of Scripture and historical Christianity. As Edward Feser notes, “In short, reason tells us that there is a God and that he has revealed such-and-such a truth; faith is then a matter of believing what reason has shown God to have revealed. In that sense faith is not only not at odds with reason but is grounded in reason.”

## **WHAT IS RATIO CHRISTI?**

Ratio Christi, Latin for the reason of Christ, wants to help reverse this trend of anti-intellectual Christianity. We organize apologetics clubs at colleges, universities, and even for high school groups in order to strengthen the faith of Christian students and faculty and challenge the rampant atheism and secularism on most campuses. Our mission is to fill the intellectual gap, to make Christianity something worth thinking about, both personally and in the public square.

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## INTRODUCTION

When we ask, “*Who* is the heart of spiritual dialogue?” we answer “God.” He is ultimately the subject of conversation.

When we ask, “*What* is the heart of spiritual dialogue?” we are referring to the primary message.<sup>1</sup> In evangelism, it is the good news that the Lord Jesus Christ died for our sins and rose bodily from the dead in victory over sin and death, so that if we trust in Him and His righteousness we are saved, having a restored relationship with God. In witnessing conversations (which extend beyond gospel talks), the heart of this dialogue will depend on the specific topic and may well be coursing with rich apologetic content.

When we ask *how* the beating heart of spiritual dialogue should *sound*, we discover the topic of this booklet. Because we are sharing the most important message in the world (the gospel of Jesus Christ) with people facing the highest stakes in the world (eternity with or without God) we want to do everything in our power to present spiritual truth in an effective way. It is one thing to know the truth; it is another to convey it in a way that doesn’t sound like conversational arrhythmia. Current cultural dialogues of topical significance pound to the beat of angst and strife. Christians have a golden opportunity to let their light shine before others by demonstrating to the culture the way in which a healthy heartbeat of discussion should sound. The H.E.A.R.T. will equip Christians with tactics for spiritual dialogue that are meant to compliment the evangelism and apologetics training they’ve received.

Dialogue, including spiritual dialogue, is an art as well as a science. The latter refers to the truth of dialogue. But the former is also important given that there are many things that can attract, detract, and distract a person in conversation. No less than Aristotle claimed rhetoric “an art.”<sup>2</sup> In fact, he saw it as “the ability . . . to see the available means of persuasion.”<sup>3</sup> Aristotle noted there are three things required for the person who longs to be in command of effecting persuasion: “(1) to reason logically, (2) to understand human character and goodness in their various forms, and (3) to understand the emotions – that is to name them and describe them, to know their causes and the way in which they are

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<sup>1</sup> In this booklet, “spiritual dialogue” refers to interactions between Christians and non-Christians. Obviously, the terms can have much wider usage.

<sup>2</sup> Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, Book 1, Ed. Richard McKeon, *The Basic Works of Aristotle* (New York: Random House, 1941), 1325.

<sup>3</sup> “Ethos, Pathos, Logos: A General Summary of Aristotle’s Appeals” (The Book of Threes, 2014) accessed 1 September 2021: available from <https://www.bookofthrees.com/ethos-pathos-logos-a-general-summary-of-aristotles-appeals/>.

excited.”<sup>4</sup> This tripartite of persuasion is known as *logos* (logical argumentation), *ethos* (character or spirit), and *pathos* (emotions).

Apologetic arguments focus on *logos*, the words of presentation. This booklet will guide the apologist with *ethos*, the way of presentation. Aristotle noted the influence a good character can have in persuasion: “It is not true, as some writers assume in their treatises on rhetoric, that the personal goodness revealed by the speaker contributes nothing to his power of persuasion; on the contrary, his character may almost be called the most effective means of persuasion he possesses.”<sup>5</sup> If you want someone to open the present you are offering, put a pretty ribbon on it. If you want someone to open their mind to the position you are offering, presentation can help. Thus, while *logos* does the heavy lifting of fortifying the soundness of a given rationale, it is *ethos* that often opens the door of the heart so that the *logos* will be heard.

The Bible commands us to have a healthy *ethos* in spiritual dialogue. The apologetic anthem of 1 Peter 3:15 begins with instruction to our hearts: “... sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts...” But how exactly are we to do that? The rest of the verse offers two guides. The first is the imperative of *what* to say: “...always being ready to make a defense...” The word “defense” is a translation of the Greek word “*apologia*,” from which we get the word apologetics. The second instruction guides the *way* to say it: “with gentleness and respect.” This is the biblical *ethos*.

## The Presence of Dialogue

A tightrope walker must proceed with precision to avoid falling either to the right or the left. For some Christians, successfully walking through a spiritual dialogue can feel like a tightrope walk. Some naturally tend to fall to the right. These are the ones who gravitate toward silence. They tend not to speak when they should. The Spirit opens the door, but these folks do not enter. They walk the rope of “friendship evangelism” by leaning exclusively toward friendship and never actually getting to evangelism! We’ll call this group of tightrope walkers “butterflies” because butterflies are silent. The other walkers tend to fall to the left. These are they that bulldoze by taking over the conversation. They *lead* when they should *listen*. They walk the rope of fact but lack the balance of *tact*. They are like the bull in a china shop, often coming on much stronger than they need or realize.

Having taught evangelism for years, it seems to me that people naturally lean toward being either butterflies or bulls. We offer suggestions to bulls in the T section of the H.E.A.R.T. discussion. As for butterflies, what keeps them so quiet? Here are some ways butterflies rationalize their silence:

- “I’ll ruin the friendship if I bring up the ‘God issue.’”

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<sup>4</sup> Aristotle, *Ibid.*, 1329-1330.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 1329-1330.

- “This person will think I’m weird.”
- “This person expects me to Bible thump them, so I’ll show them I respect them for who they are by not being ‘that guy.’”
- “I’ll be cancelled, mocked, or worse.”
- “I’m going to offend her if I tell her she is a sinner. That will just push her away.”

Thoughts like these can cloud our judgment regarding when the time is right. Fortunately, God’s word has been given to burn away the fog of those suffering from “evangel-phobia.” Paul said plainly, “I believed; therefore, I spoke.”<sup>6</sup> Again, in the book of Romans, Paul makes it clear that God expects us to be the messengers of the good news: “for ‘Whoever will call on the name of the Lord will be saved.’ How then will they call on Him in whom they have not believed? How will they believe in Him whom they have not heard? And how will they hear without a preacher? How will they preach unless they are sent? Just as it is written, ‘How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news of good things!’ However, they did not all heed the good news; for Isaiah says, ‘Lord, who has believed our report?’ So, faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ.”<sup>7</sup>

In John 4 we read of the fascinating spiritual dialogue between Jesus and the Samaritan woman at Jacob’s well. So many amazing things happen during this encounter that it is easy to overlook how it ever occurred in the first place. John tells us Jesus left Judea to go to Galilee and “He had to pass through Samaria.”<sup>8</sup> But given the historical context, this is a peculiar thing for John to say since Jewish prejudice typically led them to travel around, rather than through, Samaria. What does John mean by saying Jesus “had” to pass through Samaria? This is not a *physical/geographical* “had.” Rather, it was a *moral* “had.” He knew the door was open to share with the Samaritans and He was *morally committed* to engagement. He was looking for opportunities to share the good news, not just make friends. So too, in our case, while building friendships are important, we must also see the biblical precedent for commitment to engagement.

For butterflies who recognize the command of Scripture to share our faith, yet still struggle with questions like the ones above, consider the following replies:

- “I’ll ruin the friendship if I bring up the ‘God issue.’”  
**Response:** What kind of friendship is it if you must conceal that which is most important to you?  
**Response:** What kind of friend doesn’t accept you for you?<sup>9</sup>
- “This person will think I’m weird.”  
**Response:** Remember the words of the apostle Paul, “We have been approved

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<sup>6</sup> 2 Corinthians 4:13 NASB.

<sup>7</sup> Romans 10:13-17 NASB.

<sup>8</sup> John 4:4 NASB.

<sup>9</sup> N.B. Just because you share spiritual truth with someone doesn’t mean you don’t accept them for who they are. You are offering a gift not an ultimatum.

by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so we speak not as pleasing men, but God who examines our hearts.” (1 Thessalonians 2:4)

**Response:** There are natural ways to begin dialogues that don’t seem awkward or weird. *See section E of H.E.A.R.T. for tips.*

- “This person expects me to Bible thump them, so I’ll show them I love them by not being ‘that guy.’”

**Response:** Who knows what is in a person’s heart? Maybe they want to talk about spiritual issues.

**Response:** Our motive is not about his expectation; it is about his need.

**Response:** Not warning someone in spiritual danger is not loving.

**Response:** Perhaps the person is like the good soil from Jesus’ parable.<sup>10</sup> You won’t know unless you cast the seed.

- “I’ll be cancelled, mocked, or worse.”

**Response:** Which is worse, losing the fellowship of a friend or of your Heavenly Father?

**Response:** Possibly, “all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.” (2 Timothy 3:12) But we live in a battleground, not a playground. The latter comes later.

**Response:** In many cases, the tactics in this booklet have led to fruitful dialogue with people who oppose our view.

- “I’m going to offend her if I tell her she is a sinner. That will just push her away.”

**Response:** You are responsible for your obedience, not her response.

**Response:** She is already away from God.

**Response:** *See section E of H.E.A.R.T. for tactics on conveying touchy truths.*

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<sup>10</sup> Luke 8:5-15.

## THE PRESCRIPTION: *H.E.A.R.T.*

Of course, there are no guarantees, but by implementing the H.E.A.R.T. technique, we believe one can increase the chances of effectively walking the tightrope of spiritual dialogue, presenting the truth in love. The H.E.A.R.T. of our spiritual dialogues beat with five “chambers:”

**H** – Hearing

**E** – Examining

**A** – Affirming

**R** – Reflecting

**T** – Tenderness

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### H – Hearing

“Move!” I yelled to the man in the street, for the speeding truck was nearly upon him! But he paid me no mind and paid a dear price. Why did he not respond to my cry? Because there was a wall between us such that he could not hear me. This sobering, and thankfully fictitious, story is meant to relate two important truths. First, some truths are lifesaving. Such is the case with the gospel. If people don’t hear us, there is hell to pay. Second, in order to be heard, the barriers must not be present.

Many Christians worry that by engaging in evangelism or taking a stand for Christian values, we run the risk of the culture building a wall against us. If that happens, it is argued, we won’t be heard. The truth is the wall is already up. Our task, then, is not to keep people from building a wall against us; rather, it is to get them to take down their already constructed wall one brick at a time. But this should not be achieved by silencing the gospel or sacrificing our values. There is a better way which allows us to be true to our faith and our friends.

One way to get unbelievers to take down the bricks is to first give them the floor. In other words, demonstrate our eagerness to be *listeners*, not *lecturers*. As Norman and David Geisler have said, “Good conversation begins with good listening. Hence, the first step...is to *hear what others actually believe* and then detect discrepancies in their viewpoint.”<sup>11</sup> A

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**11** Norman Geisler and David Geisler, *Conversational Evangelism* (Eugene, Oregon: Harvest House Publishers, 2009) 46. Emphasis mine.

doctor listens to your symptoms before diagnosing. Listening makes a good learner.

In his book *Between the Words*, Dr. Norman Wakefield argues that ninety percent of the time we give our view prematurely. Either we lack all the facts, fail to understand the real need, or preempt our converser before he's finished sharing or ready for help.<sup>12</sup> Of course, in the case of evangelism, we know a lost person needs the gospel. But we may not know the specific roadblocks which is why Stephen Covey's advice, "seek first to understand, then to be understood" is so important.<sup>13</sup> Hearing others helps us share strategically, conducting ourselves with wisdom toward outsiders.<sup>14</sup>

Given that we are trying to share good and true news, it may strike some as incongruous to suggest that our first step should be listening rather than speaking. After all, we've already seen numerous passages in scripture telling us to "Go and tell." But, of course, we are not suggesting otherwise. We are simply suggesting a marriage between the *wisdom of what to say* with the *winsomeness of when to convey*. By hearing before heralding, we gain two tactical advantages: **we build bridges** and **we uncover battlegrounds**.

## BRIDGES AND BATTLEGROUND

Building a bridge connects two sides. By building a bridge in dialogue, we are finding some way to connect with our interlocutor. Though sometimes difficult in *practice*, one of the easiest bridge building tactics in *principle* is simply to listen! Let's face it, as long as people feel safe, they like to share their view. As Dale Carnegie has said: "Others are not nearly as interested in what we have to say as they are in what they want to say to us."<sup>15</sup> Listening conveys safety which in turn can motivate the other person to dismantle the preconceived wall built against us. Under the right circumstances, chances are people will want to tell you what they think.

Pick your battles. As apologists, we fight against *ideologies*, not *individuals*. In 2 Corinthians 10:5, Paul said, "We are destroying speculation and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God, taking every thought captive to Christ." By becoming good listeners, we discover which beliefs our interlocutors hold. This helps ensure our attack is aimed at the right target (the specific erroneous idea.) Getting to know our audience gives us the right starting point. Paul took full advantage of this approach in his evangelism. To the Jews he started with the scriptures (Acts 17:2); to the pagans, nature (Acts 14); to the Greeks, the Unknown God (Acts 17:23.) Listening allows us to learn where to launch.

## SMORGASBORD THEOLOGY

There are other very important reasons to become a good listener, one of which is the reality of smorgasbord theology. Between multiculturalism and relativism, people in our culture believe all kinds of things about spirituality. We cannot make the mistake

<sup>12</sup> Norman Wakefield, *Between the Words* (Fleming H Revell Co., 2002) 80-81.

<sup>13</sup> Stephen Covey, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989) 243.

<sup>14</sup> Colossians 4:5.

<sup>15</sup> Quoted in Gary Poole, *Seeker Small Groups* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003) 123.



of assuming that just because someone identifies with a particular label, they necessarily believe the traditional doctrine of their religion. I once had a dialogue with a Jehovah's Witness who agreed with me that salvation was by God's grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. That is certainly not the view espoused by the Watchtower organization!<sup>16</sup> Instead of presuming with the mind, we should attend with the ears to discover what the person actually believes.

## **PATIENCE PAYS**

If we demonstrate that we are willing to listen to others, usually they will reciprocate. Curiosity sets in their minds such that they will very naturally ask us, "What do you think?" At the very least, our patience with others earns us the right to be heard. If someone is steamrolling the conversation, we can appeal to fairness by saying something like, "I've enjoyed listening to your view and I'd love to hear what you think of my take. Would you mind if I share?"

## **BIBLICAL BASIS**

The Bible repeatedly recognizes the importance of being a good listener. Proverbs 18:13 states, "He who answers before listening – that is his folly and his shame." Why? Among other reasons, we risk answering questions no one is asking or in which no one is interested. Further, we may be telling people something they already know.

In his epistle, James guides Christians with these words: "...everyone must be quick to hear, slow to speak and slow to anger."<sup>17</sup> Notice James does not say, "We must always listen first, and we may not speak." Rather, he emphasizes the wisdom of listening *before* speaking as a general practice.

## **GUIDELINES**

How do I know if I am truly a good listener? What can I do to improve? Here are some guidelines for self-reflection:

- Can I articulate the speaker's belief?
- Before I speak, do I know more about his beliefs than he knows about mine?
- Do I know what is *true* about his view?
- Am I listening out of genuine care for the person or just going through the motions?
- Am I interrupting? If so, apologize and invite the person to finish. The fruit of the Spirit includes patience. Ask the Spirit to help you focus on patiently listening rather than interrupting.

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<sup>16</sup> *The Watchtower*, 1 April 1947, 204.

<sup>17</sup> James 1:19 NASB.

- Am I focused on the person's comments or fixated on my rebuttal?
- Is it hard for me to listen to non-Christians share their beliefs? Is it difficult to hear my beliefs challenged? If yes, why might that be and how I can overcome it?

## APPLICATION

If engaging in spiritual dialogues is difficult, the art of hearing is a great place to start! Simply ask someone about their belief and practice listening. You will quickly become comfortable advancing to the other chambers of the H.E.A.R.T.

## E – Examining

Perhaps you are ready and willing to listen. But how do you get someone talking, especially about sensitive issues like spirituality? You examine him.

If a murder is committed, a crime scene investigator may examine or inspect the scene to discover clues. Suppose you were a witness to a murder. You would be placed under examination and asked questions by an attorney as you testify in court. In both cases, the CSI and the attorney are attempting to *discover* something.

In the same way, when we say you should examine another person, we are encouraging the *discovery* of his views. And just as the attorney must use questions to reveal the witnesses' understanding, our use of “**examine**” means to question. Our questions should come from a spirit of *curiosity*, not *contentiousness*. We are not advocating an interrogation, but instead, a *conversation*!

## QUESTIONING QUESTIONS?

As apologists, we want to have the answers. But having the right questions is also an indispensable part of our arsenal. Lest you question the value of questions, we offer the following answers:

### Jesus Used Questions<sup>18</sup>

Think of how Jesus' genius was displayed through questions to escape dilemmas as well as motivate, convict, and refute listeners:

- “Who do you say that I am?” (Mark 8:29)

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<sup>18</sup> This point is elaborated in Gary Poole's book *Seeker Small Groups*, 122.

- Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robber?” (Luke 10:36)
- “What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul?” (Matthew 16:26)
- “If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you?” (Luke 6:32)

### Questions Convey Concern

Questions show you care. They say, “I want to hear your take on this issue.” They treat people as *people*, not *projects*. They send the message, “I want to know you.” Tell them you love them by asking, then listening.

### Icebreakers

Questions open doors to conversation. So often I’ve talked to Christians who want to have spiritual dialogues but question how to start, when how to start is question one! If we are too intimidated to open the door to spiritual conversation, how much more is the unbeliever? Don’t wait for them, question them. Here are some questions you can use that are non-threatening and can get a spiritual conversation going:

- **“What is your background?”** followed at some point by, **“What is your *spiritual* background?”** followed by, **“What are your current spiritual beliefs?”**
- **“How have your beliefs changed over the years?”** followed, if necessary, by, **“What about your spiritual beliefs?”**
- **“How have your beliefs changed since you’ve been in/out of college?”**
- **“What are your hang-ups about Christianity?”**
- **“If you could ask God one question and you knew He’d answer, what would you ask?”**
- **“Do you have weekend plans?”** followed by **“Do you go to church around here?”**
- **“What is your opinion of the Christian gospel?”**

Note that in some cases we included some pre-spiritual questions to set a context that could naturally lead to a spiritual question. For those individuals intimidated by presumed awkwardness, this can be a nice way to wade slowly into the pool.<sup>19</sup>

### Questions are Non-Threatening

When done tactfully, spiritual questions come across as non-threatening because you are *asking*, not *attacking*. If someone becomes abrasive, you can always remind him

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<sup>19</sup> For those who feel awkward about starting spiritual conversations because you have an agenda, remember that people often, if not always, have agendas for beginning conversations. It may be to show love, convert you to a political party, sell you something, help themselves, etc.... If others can have agendas when engaging you, why can’t you when engaging them? After all, your agenda is the most important one in the world!

you are simply asking for his view in an effort to better know him. You are not *pushing* a view on him. You don't even know his view yet! You are seeking *information* not *confrontation*.

Because examining through questions usually feels non-combative, it is easier for the listener to receive, and often easier for the speaker to share. Hence, questions can be win-wins, particularly in a society that is hypersensitive to a spirit of judgmentalism.

Once enough information is gathered, it may become apparent that certain un-biblical ideologies do need to be confronted. But questions can still be used to do this in a way that feels non-threatening. For example, suppose you are dialoguing with a pluralist who believes all paths lead to heaven. You want to convey to them the truth of John 14:6. Consider two different approaches:

**Tell:** "Jesus is the only way!" *or*

**Question:** "Why do you think Jesus claimed to be the only way?"

Notice that both approaches convey the same basic truth you want to get across; namely, the exclusive claim by Christ. But as you say them aloud, do you hear how much softer the second approach is?

Consider another example of how we can make apologetic truth claims within the guise of a question. Suppose you are speaking with someone who rejects the doctrine of hell and, out of love, you want to convey that hell is a reality for those who reject Jesus. Here are two ways to say it:

**Tell:** "Hell exists and you are going there if you reject Christ!" *or*

**Question:** "What should God do with those who reject Christ and don't want to be with Him forever?"

Either way, the issue is sobering. But the second approach may have a better shot of keeping the dialogue going while still making your point.

At this point, I want to emphasize that there are times when a direct statement may be more appropriate than a question. You will have to use wisdom to discern when questions will work and when you'll need to be more direct.

## EXAMINE PRACTICE

Before moving on, practice transforming these theological sticklers into questions that convey truth. For possible questions, see the footnotes.

- "Homosexuality is a sin."<sup>20</sup>
- "You are not a 'good person' by God's standards."<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> "Why might God consider homosexual behavior a sin?"

<sup>21</sup> "Why do you think Jesus said that only God is good?" (Mark 10:18); "Why do you think the Ten Commandments were given?"; "Why do you think Jesus called mankind 'evil' in Matthew 7:11?"; "What are God's

- “You are choosing your sinful lifestyle over God.”<sup>22</sup>
- “You believe in a false god.”<sup>23</sup>

## Critical Thinking

Questions are a great way to guide someone out of the fog of confused thoughts into the light of critical thinking. They encourage the other person to think through an issue. This is a particularly important discipline because, among other reasons, so many people are led by their preferences rather than careful examination. As Blaise Pascal said, “People almost invariably arrive at their beliefs not on the basis of proof but on the basis of what they find attractive.”<sup>24</sup> Asking good questions calls on listeners to confront the reason(s) why they hold the views they do.

## Questions Drive the Conversation

We often think of the answerer as the one in control of the conversation; after all, he’s the one doing most of the talking. But as Greg Koukl points out in his excellent book, *Tactics*, it is the questioner: “carefully placed questions put you in the driver’s seat of the conversation.”<sup>25</sup> How so? Because the question steers the direction of the conversation.

Jesus often used questions as a tactic to regain control of the conversation. An excellent example of this is when Jesus was teaching in the temple. Right in the middle of His sermon He is publicly challenged by the chief priests and the elders: “By what authority are You doing these things, and who gave You this authority?”<sup>26</sup> How is our Lord to get control of this situation? Notice His move: “Jesus said to them, ‘I will also ask you one thing, which if you tell Me, I will also tell you by what authority I do these things. The baptism of John was from what source, from heaven or from men?’”<sup>27</sup> Implicit in Jesus’ response is His awareness that questions guide the discussion. Notice Jesus is unwilling to immediately answer the questions of the chief priests, knowing that doing so gives them the power over the topic.

Instead, the Messiah responds with a question which regains Him control as is evident by His critic’s reaction: “And they began reasoning among themselves, saying, ‘If we say, ‘From heaven,’ He will say to us, ‘Then why did you not believe him?’ But if we say, ‘From men,’ we fear the people; for they all regard John as a prophet.’ And answering Jesus, they said, ‘We do not know.’ He also said to them, ‘Neither will I tell

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standards to be considered a ‘good person’?”

**22** “Which do you value more, temporal things or eternal things?”; “Is there anything more important to you than God?”

**23** “What evidence leads you to believe your view of god is true?”; “If your view and my view of God differ, how could we determine which, if either, is correct?”; “What have critics of your belief said?”

**24** Quoted in Norman Geisler and Frank Turek, *I Don’t Have Enough Faith to be an Atheist* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2004) 51.

**25** Greg Koukl, *Tactics: A Game Plan for Discussing Your Christian Convictions, Updated and Expanded* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2019) kindle version, 59.

**26** Matthew 21:23 NASB.

**27** Matthew 21:24-25a NASB.

you by what authority I do these things.”<sup>28</sup> Now, notice what happened after Jesus’ question. The focus of the Jewish leaders was no longer on their question; it was on Jesus’ question! His question trumped their inquiry by redirecting the focus. Jesus was out of the hot seat as quickly as He was put in it. The chief priests, however, were fried.

## EXAMINATION QUESTIONS

Perhaps you might say, “Icebreakers and putting statements in question form are helpful tactics, but I’m still questioning what else to question.” While there are a number of categories an apologist can explore, for the sake of brevity, we will suggest that you examine someone by asking them the same two questions for which you hope to give answers: **1) What** do you believe? (evangelism) and **2) Why** do you believe it? (apologetics) — these two questions often provide lots of information, demonstrate your interest, and set the context for your answers to those questions.

## A – Affirming

“Ready, Aim, Fire!” Sadly, some unbelievers have had interactions with Christians that felt more like being in front of a firing squad than a loving ambassador. I see this all too frequently on campus when radical groups, in the name of Christ, publicly belittle passerby students through name calling and mockery by saying things like, “People who dress like that go to hell!” or “God hates fags!” In effect, these groups fire at the crowd and end up putting the target on the backs of biblical Christians who are seen as haters.

But it isn’t just the radicals that end up souring the sweetness of the gospel. Many well-intentioned believers find themselves getting defensive in a hurry when their most cherished beliefs are challenged, dare I say, threatened. This can cause a spirit of antagonism to rise to the surface which is likely to poison the conversation.

Rather than a “Ready, *Aim*, Fire!” approach to dialogue, we suggest a “Ready, *Affirm*, Fire!” approach. That is, before we pull the theological truth trigger, demonstrate love toward the person by finding some way to affirm them. To be sure, part of loving someone is telling them the truth.<sup>29</sup> But we can build more than a bridge to a theological *position*; we can also build a bridge to a *person*.

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<sup>28</sup> Matthew 21:25b-27 NASB.

<sup>29</sup> Mark 10:21.

Affirmation builds a bridge. It seeks and then exposes common ground. It is a way of saying, “There is something that connects us.” And connecting with people in a holy, righteous way is something we should strive to do. Remember how motivated Paul was to relate to others? He wrote, “To the Jews I became as a Jew, so that I might win Jews; to those under the Law, as under the law though not being myself under the Law, so that I might win those who are under the Law; to those who are without law, as without law, though not being without the law of God but under the law of Christ, so that I might win those who are without law. To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some.”<sup>30</sup> One easy way for us to relate to others is through affirmation.

When someone affirms us, do we typically see them as a friend or a foe? Most of us are not terribly repulsed by compliments. In fact, we usually like them! But humor aside, the question remains, “*How* can we affirm a non-Christian in a spiritual dialogue?”

## **AFFIRMATION OF THE TRUTH**

In a spiritual conversation, there are at least three ways in which we can affirm our discussion partner. The first is to *affirm the truth of the person’s view* and then point out the differences. In Luke 10, we see Jesus use this approach while being tested by a lawyer about eternal life.<sup>31</sup> Jesus begins by examining (good tactic!) the lawyer: “What is written in the law? How does it read to you?” The lawyer gives a good answer: “You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.” Jesus replies by affirming the truth of the man’s analysis: “**You have answered correctly**; do this and you will live.”

Nearly all worldviews and philosophies have some element of truth in them. That is one reason they appeal to people! Rather than simply discarding someone’s entire view, we should wield our critical thinking scalpels with precision, surgically removing the bad and retaining the good. In so doing, we not only build a truth bridge to our unbelieving friend, we honor truth where we find it. We also demonstrate to our unbelieving friend that he is not stupid, just partially misguided. All truth is God’s truth. When we find it, we can affirm it and build from it to the Author of Truth.

How might affirmation of truth look in a spiritual dialogue? Join me on the college campus during my dialogue with a liberal Muslim:

**Muslim:** “We worship the same God.”

**Me:** “Oh, what makes you say that?” (*Examine*)

**Muslim:** “He is the God of Abraham.”

**Me:** “I agree with you that there is some commonality *historically*, but are there not significant differences *theologically*?” (*Affirm, then Examine*)

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<sup>30</sup> 1 Corinthians 9:20-22 NASB.

<sup>31</sup> Luke 10:25-37.

Notice, the truth was affirmed before exposing the error. This showed my Muslim friend that I was taking her view seriously while also thinking critically.

## AFFIRMATION OF CHARACTER

Perhaps the person with whom you are speaking is not speaking much truth. You are not out of options. You may be able to build a bridge by affirming the person's character. Even if they've got the wrong *logos*, perhaps they have the right *ethos*. A little kindness goes a long way, and it goes both ways! Just as we want our good works to be seen by men for the glory of God, so we can appreciate the kindness of others.

Affirming another person is an act of kindness, having not only a bridge building component, but ministerial and tactical ones. Proverbs 16:24 says, "Pleasant words are a honeycomb, sweet to the soul and healing to the bones." Could an unsaved person with whom you are dialoguing use some healing words? Proverbs 16:21 says that, "pleasant words [lit. sweetness of speech] increases persuasiveness." Not only are people more likely to want to dialogue with you if you affirm them, they may be more attracted to your argument!

I once had the pleasure of dialoging with a Wiccan, lesbian, progressive student on campus. I say it was a pleasure because, though we had very little in common ideologically, she was nice; she was polite; she listened; she asked good questions. Early in our conversation, I offered her an apologetics book and she politely refused. But we kept talking and I challenged many of her views all the while affirming her character. I genuinely enjoyed speaking with her and I let her know it. After one and a half hours of discussion, she closed our conversation by saying, "You know, if the offer is still open, I would like that Jesus book you offered a while back."

## AFFIRMATION OF FEELINGS

The word "feelings" is to an apologist a bit like the words "wounded gazelle" to a lion. We are ready to pounce! "Truth is not determined by feelings!" True enough, and we are right to point it out. However, there is a sense in which we can affirm a person's feelings even when we can't affirm the truth behind those feelings. We do this by affirming the person's emotion behind their view.

For a biblical example, consider Paul's defense to a hostile Jewish crowd. In Acts 22:3, Paul exclaims, "I am a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city, educated under Gamaliel, strictly according to the law of our fathers, **being zealous for God just as you all are today.**" Paul isn't about to affirm the Jew's truth claim that he defiled the Temple!<sup>32</sup> He isn't about to affirm their character as liars! But he can try to begin soothing the savagery by connecting with them. This he attempts in two ways: First, he identifies with their ethnicity as a fellow Jew. Second, he *affirms* their zeal (their passion) for God, something with which Paul identifies.

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<sup>32</sup> Acts 21:28 NASB.



One example in which this opportunity often presents itself today surrounds the sincerity rebuttal. To the exclusivity of Christ, it is often rebutted, “But what about non-believers who are sincere? Maybe they don’t believe in Jesus, but they sincerely worship a different understanding of God.” Before we launch into our arguments refuting sincerity alone as a sufficient condition for salvation, let’s not miss the opportunity to affirm the person’s feelings about the situation. Perhaps we could say, “You seem to have a strong desire to want people to be saved. And you also seem to see how heartbreaking it would be for one to pour one’s heart and soul into something that fails. I appreciate and relate to your feelings in this regard.” Not only have we built a bridge to her heart, we can now use our common ground as a launching pad to advance the truth to her mind. “The Bible calls for sincerity and truth (Joshua 24:14.) Truth is necessary because people can be sincerely wrong (both factually and morally.) Factually, I can sincerely go the wrong direction on my journey and not reach my destination. Morally, many atrocities have been committed out of sincere beliefs, such as religious terror attacks, for example. *Now, given our passion for people’s destiny, shouldn’t we encourage people to sincerely pursue the true direction?*”

## **AFFIRMATION PRACTICE**

Here are some examples of the kinds of dialogues you may encounter. Practice affirming before firing.

- “I’m a good person.”<sup>33</sup>
- “I think God is so loving that He saves everyone.”<sup>34</sup>
- “I don’t want to be part of a Christian hate group.”<sup>35</sup>

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**33** “Sounds like morality is important to you and I think you are right to take it seriously. But I wonder if we would measure up to God’s standard of goodness. Have you considered the Ten Commandments?”

**34** “I agree with you that God loves everyone. But aren’t healthy relationships 2-way? What is God to do with people who don’t want Him? Heaven shouldn’t be like a shotgun wedding, should it?”

**35** “Me neither! I’m with you. We need a lot more love in the world and I don’t think you’ll find a bigger proponent of love than Jesus. He taught us to love sacrificially and even to love those who oppose us. How does that stack up to your view of love?”; “Sounds like you have a heart for people. Me too. But what do you mean by ‘hate’?”

## R – Reflecting

Spiritual dialogues seek to move below the shallow waters of small talk, diving to the depth of a person's most cherished beliefs. Deep waters are serious business. People can quickly become uncomfortable; they may feel threatened, foolish, or convicted. Further, the enemy of our souls is, doubtless, fighting to keep people in his clutches. We should empathize with what an unsaved person is going through as they process the severity of their situation. We want to be *helpers*, not *hinderers*.

If an animal is cornered, it is likely to strike out in self-defense. As apologists, we are, in effect, attempting to corner people with ideas; that is to say, we are presenting truths that lead to a particular conclusion. The nature of truth demands this approach. Because of the serious nature of spiritual discussions and the exclusivity of truth, both non-Christians and Christians can easily feel cornered and begin lashing out. Fear, pride, and anger begin to take over and suddenly civility turns into chaos. In hopes of avoiding such commotion, employ the tactic of *Reflecting*.

Reflecting is also referred to as mirroring. It is so named because it calls upon the listener to reflect or mirror back the statement or view that was conveyed to him. There is a key phrase that should be memorized in the deployment of this tactic: “What I’m hearing you say is...” and then reflect back what the person said. For example, if someone says to you, “Don’t you get it? Jesus never existed! You worship a myth!” you would respond, “What I’m hearing you say is that because Jesus never existed, I’m worshipping a myth. Is that right?” If someone were to spout, “Only an idiot rejects Darwinian evolution!” a creationist would reply, “What I’m hearing you say is ‘Only idiots reject Darwinian evolution,’ right?”

To some, this tactic might seem so simplistic as to be trivial. It is not. In fact, this tactic is often taught in marriage counseling to spouses who have trouble communicating effectively. While this tactic is simple in principle, it is difficult in practice! Emotions can quickly snowball such that each party feels compelled to make his/her point rather than contemplate the words of the other. Effective listening is gone. The gloves are off.

There are five major reasons to make this tactic prominent in your tool kit:

### **1. Reflecting *ensures* you understand the argument.**

When you reflect, you must focus on what is being said rather than fixating on your pithy comeback. Immediately following your reflection should be the follow-up question, “Did I get that right?” Hence, we give the person a chance to clarify whether we have an accurate portrayal of their argument.

### **2. Reflecting *assures* the person with whom you’re speaking.**

Reflecting also assures your interlocutor that you are hearing and understanding them. It is easy for people to mistake disagreement for misunderstanding. If you mirror, you assure the person that you are tracking with them. Then if he hears

resistance to his ideas, he can at least know that it is not because of a breakdown in communication. Instead, there may be something wrong with his argument.

Mirroring not only assures your friend that you understand, but that you want to understand. Reflecting is an active demonstration of your effort to hear.

### **3. Reflecting *stills* the waters.**

When the waters of dialogue start to become turbulent, we do well to try stilling them. Failing to do this is often where a discussion is lost. People want to know they are being heard; consequently, when they hear you mirroring, they are apt to settle down and listen to your words. This calms the pace of discussion. Further, it not only stills turbulent waters, it can prevent waters from getting choppy in the first place.

### **4. Reflecting *stalls* for time.**

Many Christians have confessed to me that they avoid spiritual conversations because they “can’t think of what to say in time.” Employing the art of reflection can help with this. While mirroring, you are not supposed to add any new content. As you repeat the argument you just heard, you buy yourself additional time to digest it. Many times, all you need are those few extra moments to formulate your thoughts.

Quite often, when you reflect someone’s comment, they will pick up and continue by elaborating on their point. This buys you additional time and information!

### **5. Reflecting allows your converser to *reflect* upon the reflection.**

Believe it or not, on more than one occasion I’ve mirrored back an argument and as my converser considered his original comment, he would reply something like, “That’s what I said but when I hear it back, I don’t think it works.” People sometimes say absurd things in the heat of the moment and, upon hearing it back, will do the work of rejecting their argument for you!

## **COMMON QUESTION**

People learning this tactic often ask whether they need to reflect precisely the same words or whether it is okay to summarize. Technically, mirroring calls for precise repetition, particularly when first beginning the practice. But admittedly, this can begin to seem a little weird in a non-counseling environment. It is one thing to have a married couple practice precise reflecting when both parties are in on the tactic. But in a spiritual dialogue where only one person knows what is going on, careful summary might come across as more conversational. However, especially in a high conflict situation, precise reflection is advised.

## T – Tender Tone

“To communicate with another is to enter into union with someone capable of sharing that union.”<sup>36</sup> How do you want that union to be? Better yet, how does God want you to be in that interaction? As we’ve already seen from 1 Peter 3:15, God’s word is clear: “make a defense [apologetic] to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with **gentleness** and **respect**.” The latter word, “respect,” is translated from the Greek word *phobos*, which is often translated “fear” or “reverence.” The Greek word translated “gentleness” (*prautes*) can also be translated meekness or humility. The spirit conveyed here is one of tenderness.

The word “tender” is defined as, “very loving and gentle: showing affection and love for someone or something.”<sup>37</sup> Hence, we demonstrate this *affection* through *inflection* as Ephesians 4:15 guides: “...speaking the truth in love.”

Consider additional biblical commands regarding the tenderness of our spiritual dialogues:

### **Colossians 4:5-6**

“Conduct yourselves with wisdom toward outsiders, making the most of every opportunity. **Let your speech always be with grace**, as though seasoned with salt, so that you will know how you should respond to each person.”

Notice Paul emphasizes that we should always have graceful speech by likening it to being “seasoned with salt.” In biblical times, salt was valued as a preservative and for seasoning food. The culture came to often use salt to ratify agreements, seeing salt as a symbol of fidelity and constancy.<sup>38</sup> Numbers 18:19 refers to an “everlasting covenant of salt” suggesting its perpetual nature. Hence, in Colossians, Paul is instructing that our speech with non-Christians should be perpetually preserving grace.

### **1 Timothy 3:3**

In order to be an elder in the church, one must be “gentle, peaceable.” Later in the same letter, Paul commands Timothy, a “man of God,” to pursue “gentleness.” (1 Timothy 6:11)

### **Philippians 4:5**

Paul told the Philippian church: “Let your gentle *spirit* be known to all men.”

### **1 Thessalonians 2:7**

Paul reminds the church in Thessalonica of the spirit in which his team had witnessed to them: “We proved to be gentle among you, as a nursing mother

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<sup>36</sup> Frederick D. Wilhelmsen, *Man’s Knowledge of Reality: An Introduction to Thomistic Epistemology* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1956) 55

<sup>37</sup> Merriam-Webster Dictionary.

<sup>38</sup> *New Bible Dictionary*, eds. I. Howard Marshall, A. R. Millard, J.I. Packer, D.J. Wiseman, (Downer Groves, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 1962) 1046.

tenderly cares for her own children.”

### **Titus 3:2**

Paul instructs Titus to remind believers “to malign no one, to be peaceable, gentle, showing every consideration for all men.”

In addition to the biblical commands, there are numerous other reasons to present God’s truth with tenderness. First, we are His ambassadors and, thus, represent Him to the world. God loves the world and wants that truth conveyed in our representation of Him.

Our interlocutor is made in the image of God. As such that person has intrinsic worth and should be spoken to in a manner consistent with said worth.

Blaise Pascal said, “The tone of voice impacts the wisest, and changes the pressure of a discourse or a poem.”<sup>39</sup> Given the choice, would you prefer to listen to someone who is tender and respectful toward you, or harsh and condescending? When one shouts, the listener tends to recoil. When one whispers, the listener tends to lean in. We have a better shot of getting someone to “lean into our conversations” by providing an *inviting* rather than *inciting* environment.

Many of us have been in conversations in which we can see the tide taking a turn for the worse. But our desire as Christians is, in the words of Dr. Corey Miller, “to bring more light than heat.” When the pot begins to boil over, turn down the flame. “A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.” (Proverbs 15:1.) Tenderness allows us to be *engaging* without *enraging*. To control the pace of the conversation and promote thoughtful discussion, try a little tenderness.

Gentleness is not only more inviting to the listener, it is better for the speaker. When we lose our temper, we tend to say illogical and/or hurtful things. Cooler heads prevail allowing us to *defend* without being *defensive*.

## **OBJECTIONS TO TENDERNESS**

**Objection 1:** Jesus wasn’t always gentle. He was gentle with the humble but firm with the proud.

**Response:** You’re not Jesus! (Sorry, that wasn’t very gentle was it?) Joking aside, Jesus knows the heart and mind of each person and, therefore, knows when someone must be convicted and when someone needs to be uplifted.<sup>40</sup> We do not have the insight of knowing another’s heart. Because of our finitude, we are called to tread tenderly. Additionally, Jesus is God and Judge. We are not. Finally, one can be both firm on truth and gentle in tone.

**Objection 2:** John the Baptist wasn’t gentle, for he said to the Pharisees and Sadducees, “You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?”

**Response:** John was a prophet who received special revelation from God. So again,

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<sup>39</sup> Blaise Pascal, *Pensees*, Loc 754, #82, Kindle.

<sup>40</sup> See Mark 2:8 for an example of Jesus knowing the hearts of those who opposed Him.

John had insight that we do not. What we do have is a direct message from God about how he wants us to speak; namely, with gentleness.

**Objection 3:** Man up or man down? – Men are supposed to be tough, not tender. We are soldiers! We need to man up. We need warriors not wimps.

**Response:** All Christians are called to be soldiers. (2 Timothy 2:3) But the very draft papers that enlist us make it clear in what way we are to march: “with gentleness, correcting those who are in opposition.” (2 Timothy 2:25) Being tender does not mean we are not confrontational about truth. (Titus 1:9) It means we are caring and kind in our confrontation. Proverbs 3:3 says, “Do not let kindness and truth leave you; bind them around your neck; write them on the tablet of your heart.” As a soldier, remember the enemy: “...the devil. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places.” (Ephesians 6:11-12) “We are destroying speculations” not speculators, “taking every thought captive to Christ” so we can free the thinker. (2 Corinthians 10:5) Our marching orders are as follows: boldness to speak, tender in tone, tough in truth. It takes a strong character to balance both control and conviction.

**Objection 4:** People respect powerful preaching.

**Response:** Are you preaching or dialoguing?

**Objection 5:** Some cultures respond better to contention than to gentleness. Tenderness is seen by some as a sign of weakness in argumentation.

**Response:** It is certainly appropriate to mold to a culture in order to get the gospel heard provided we aren't breaking any moral or scriptural commands in the process. In the case of our speech, God is clear about how He wants His message conveyed – **in content, truth; in conviction, firm; in tone, tender.** If one feels the need to address a cultures' desire for contentious dialogue, one can point out that truth is not determined by bravado and that relying on the latter to win an argument is fallacious. Instead, speak with gentleness and respect which will “heap burning coals on his head.” (Proverbs 25:22) As God's word, the Bible was written for multiple cultures. In all likelihood, an open-minded person will be willing to respond to respectful dialogue. Furthermore, one is better off siding with Divine prerogatives than cultural pragmatism.

**Objection 6:** “Tenderness is not in my personality!”

**Response:** Perhaps you think yourself incapable of tenderness because it just isn't in your nature. Well, perhaps you are incapable on your own. But *God* is capable of blossoming gentleness in your life as you walk by His Spirit, trusting Him each moment to empower you. The fruit of the Spirit is, “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness,

goodness, faithfulness, **gentleness**, self-control.”<sup>41</sup> Do not be deceived into thinking that only some of the fruit is available to you. The Greek word Paul uses for fruit (*karpos*) is singular, not plural. Hence, all the attributes of the fruit are in you as you walk by the Spirit rather than by the flesh.

## THE TESTS OF TENDERNESS

Desiring to speak with gentleness is one thing, but for us “bulls in the China shop,” how can we know if we’re accomplishing it? Here are some guidelines to help you self-examine.

- **Am I speaking to a few people as if to many?** If so, I’m probably not conveying a spirit of gentleness.
- **Do my words sound more like *humility* or *hubris*?** None of us knows it all (1 Corinthians 8:1, 13:12).<sup>42</sup> It is important to remain teachable (Proverbs 9:8-9).
- **Must I have the last word?** So often we feel like we must get in the last word or we’ve lost the discussion. You do not always have to get the last word. State your position clearly and kindly, offer your evidence, and if the other person wants to have the final say in the discussion, give them that courtesy. After all, that isn’t likely to be the final say anyway. Leave that to the Holy Spirit! You are not witnessing alone. He will continue to work on the person’s conscience after the conversation is finished. His work will be more penetrating than ours.
- **Does my tone sound like an *enemy* or an *ally*?** Try to bring people along rather than put them down.

ENEMY	ALLY
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “That view is crazy!”</li> <li>• “Only idiots believe stuff like that.”</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Can you help me understand something that is confusing to me about that view?”</li> <li>• “Have you considered an alternative?”</li> </ul>

## GUIDE FOR GENTLENESS

- **Reliance on the Spirit:**

**Pray for gentleness** (Galatians 5:23).

**Pray for the person to whom you’re speaking.** “Open his/her heart to Your

<sup>41</sup> Galatians 5:22-3 NASB.

<sup>42</sup> This is not to say we can’t sound confident in the truth. But I must remember it is not *my* truth; it is *the* truth. I am just grateful to God that He has revealed it to me, and I can share it with others as others did with me. We also do well to separate primary issues (in which we can stand firm) from secondary issues.

truth, O Lord.” You don’t get to change someone’s mind. That is up to the person and God. You *converse*; God *converts*.

- **Focus on loving the person** where they are but not leaving them there.
- **Stay humble!** I don’t know it all! Apart from God, I can do nothing.
- **Convey the argument** (2 Corinthians 4:13); **win the person** (Mark 1:17).



## CONCLUSION

Jesus said we should be “wise as serpents and as innocent as doves.” (Matthew 10:16) We study to show ourselves approved and convey truth in a godly fashion. It is our hope that by implementing the H.E.A.R.T., you will show yourself a living witness of wisdom and innocence while enriching your spiritual dialogues.

## FURTHER READING

Greg Koukl, *Tactics: A Game Plan for Discussing Your Christian Convictions, Updated and Expanded* (Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 2019)

Norman Geisler and David Geisler, *Conversational Evangelism* (Eugene, Oregon: Harvest House Publishers, 2009)

James Kennedy, *Evangelism Explosion, 4th Edition* (Tyndale House Publishers, Wheaton, 1996)

Gary Poole, *Seeker Small Groups* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003)

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Andrew Foland graduated with his Masters' degree in Christian Apologetics from Southern Evangelical Seminary in 2007. Upon graduation, he taught Christian Apologetics, Philosophy, and Ethics at Crossroads Bible College. Afterward, he ministered at Fellowship Bible Church as the Christian Education Pastor. Currently, he works in campus ministry as an apologist with Ratio Christi (Reason of Christ) Ministries where he serves as both the Area Ministry Director for the state of Indiana and the Chapter Director on the campus of Indiana University - Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI.) Additionally, Andy is a certified teacher for Anchorsaway Ministries, a worldview ministry for high school students. He is a guest speaker at churches, conferences, parachurch organizations, high school co-ops, and on radio where he teaches apologetics, evangelism, and the Bible. Andrew can be reached at [andrewfoland@ratiochristi.org](mailto:andrewfoland@ratiochristi.org).

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