

A NEW KIND
— of —
APOLOGIST

SEAN MCDOWELL
GENERAL EDITOR



HARVEST HOUSE PUBLISHERS
EUGENE, OREGON

Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from the ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Verses marked NIV are from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.® Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

Verses marked NASB are from the New American Standard Bible®, © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission. (www.Lockman.org)

Verses marked NLT are from the Holy Bible, New Living Translation, copyright © 1996, 2004, 2007, 2013 by Tyndale House Foundation. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Carol Stream, Illinois 60188. All rights reserved.

Cover by Dual Identity, Inc,

Cover photo © Brayden Heath / Lightstock

A NEW KIND OF APOLOGIST

Copyright © 2016 Sean McDowell

Published by Harvest House Publishers

Eugene, Oregon 97402

www.harvesthousepublishers.com

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

A new kind of apologist / Sean McDowell, PhD, general editor.

pages cm

ISBN 978-0-7369-6605-4 (pbk.)

ISBN 978-0-7369-6606-1 (eBook)

1. Apologetics. 2. Christianity and culture. I. McDowell, Sean, editor.

BT1103.N484 2016

239—dc23

2015021781

All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, digital, photocopy, recording, or any other—except for brief quotations in printed reviews, without the prior permission of the publisher.

Printed in the United States of America

16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 / LB-JC / 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

To my son, Shane.

I pray that you will be the kind of apologist
that your generation needs.

I love you and am so proud of you.

Contents

Introduction: A New Kind of Apologist	11
SEAN MCDOWELL	

PART 1 A New Approach to Apologetics

1	Christians in the Argument Culture: Apologetics as Conversation TIM MUEHLHOFF	21
2	Apologetics and New Technologies BRIAN AUTEN	29
	<i>Interview with Bart Campolo</i>	37
3	Servant Apologetics TOM GILSON	39
4	Motivating Others to “Give an Answer” MARK MITTELBERG	47
5	Social Justice and a New Kind of Apologist KEN WYTSMA AND RICK GERHARDT	57
	<i>Interview with J.P. Moreland</i>	65
6	“Don’t Blame Us, It’s in the Bible” Understanding New Strategies for Shaking Up the Faith of New Generations DAN KIMBALL	67

PART 2 New Methods in Apologetics

- 7 Shepherd Is a Verb: The Role of Relational Mentoring
in Communicating Truth 79
JEFF MYERS
- 8 A Practical Plan to Raise Up the Next Generation 87
BRETT KUNKLE
- Interview with Dennis Rainey* 97
- 9 The Multiethnic Church: God's Living Apologetic 101
DERWIN L. GRAY
- 10 Come and See: 111
The Value of Storytelling for Apologetics
HOLLY ORDWAY
- 11 Using Hollywood Blockbusters to Share Your Faith 119
LENNY ESPOSITO
- 12 The Urban Apologist 127
CHRISTOPHER BROOKS
- 13 Intuitional Apologetics: 137
Using Our Deepest Intuitions to Point Toward God
TERRY GLASPEY
- Interview with Gavin MacFarland* 146
- 14 Why We Should Love Questions 149
More than Answers
MATTHEW ANDERSON
- 15 Why More Women Should Study Apologetics 157
MARY JO SHARP

PART 3 New Issues in Apologetics

16	A Christian Political Apologetic: Why, What, and How JENNIFER A. MARSHALL	167
17	An Assessment of the Present State of Historical Jesus Studies MICHAEL LICONA	175
18	How to Question the Bible in a Post-Christian Culture JONATHAN MORROW	183
	<i>Interview with Hemant Mehta</i>	192
19	Entrepreneurs: An Economic Apologetic for the Faith JAY W. RICHARDS	195
20	Telling the Truth About Sex in a Broken Culture JOHN STONESTREET	203
21	Being Authentically Christian on the LGBT Issue GLENN T. STANTON	211
22	Transgender: Truth and Compassion ALAN SHLEMON	219
23	An Apologetic for Religious Liberty JAMES TONKOWICH	229
	<i>Interview with John Njoroge</i>	237
24	Advocating Intelligent Design with Integrity, Grace, and Effectiveness CASEY LUSKIN	241

25	The Scientific Naturalist Juggernaut and What to Do About It SCOTT SMITH	255
26	Water that Satisfies the Muslim's Thirst ABDU MURRAY	263
27	But...What About Other Religions? TANYA WALKER	273
	Notes	281

— Introduction —

A New Kind of Apologist

SEAN MCDOWELL

During a trip to Breckenridge, a beautiful ski town in the mountains of Colorado, a friend and I decided to get our hair cut at one of the little shops downtown. As we waited our turn, I read another chapter of the book I had brought along with me, a book whose title clearly indicated my interest in spiritual things.

When my turn came and I settled into the chair, the young hairstylist noted that I was reading a Christian book and wondered if it would be okay for her to ask me a question about God that had been on her mind. Of course I said yes, relishing the opportunity to talk about theology. After all, I had been studying apologetics and was ready with all the right answers. *Bring it on*, I thought, smiling to myself.

“Well,” she started, with just a hint of hesitation, “why does God allow so much evil and suffering in the world?”

Really, that’s all you got? raced through my mind. *Why is this such a big problem?* It’s one of the most oft-asked questions in apologetics, and I was ready with the classical free-will defense—emphasizing that God desires a relationship with us, which is possible only if we have free will. I made the point that

evil can exist only if there is first a standard of objective good and there can be good only if there is a God. In other words, her very question, I pointed out, presupposes the existence of God.

This led to more questions, and I found I could answer each one pretty easily. She'd ask a question, and I had an answer ready at hand.

Things were going extraordinarily well, I thought, until she paused for a long moment, lifted the scissors away from my head, and then began to cry. She stepped back from cutting my hair and said in a quavering voice, "This is a bunch of bs! You've got an answer for everything. It *can't* be that easy. You just don't understand."

I was speechless (and a bit nervous, since she was clearly upset and had very sharp scissors poised not far from my head).

What had just happened? It seemed like we were having a great conversation...and now this. Well, I quickly changed the topic and made sure to give her a big tip on the way out. Outside the shop, I turned to my friend and asked him why he thought she had been so defensive. He took a deep breath and looked me in the eyes, probably trying to determine if I was ready to hear the truth.

"Well," he said, as gently as he could manage, "do you have any idea how arrogant you were toward her?"

I was taken aback. But as we walked along the streets of Breckenridge, I thought about the encounter and realized he was absolutely right. Rather than really listening to her, asking questions, and trying to learn from her, I was more interested in scoring points and winning the argument. My replies had come across as prepackaged sound bites rather than compassionate and respectful responses. What I saw, maybe for the first time, is that truth must be wedded to grace, and that what we say is important...but *how* we say it is equally critical.

If we have the best arguments but not love, our arguments will often fall on deaf ears (1 Corinthians 13:1-3). A new kind of apologist must have both truth and love. This is why the apostle Paul said,

And the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, correcting his opponents with gentleness. God may perhaps grant them repentance leading

to a knowledge of the truth, and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, after being captured by him to do his will (2 Timothy 2:24-26).

Whenever the problem of suffering and evil come up, I try to avoid simple answers. I typically respond with a question: “Of all the things you can ask about God, why that one?” Occasionally people have a genuine intellectual issue they want to wrestle with, and I am more than happy to help. But more often than not, the intellectual question masks a deep personal wound. When I ask this question, I often hear painful stories of sickness, broken relationships, and abuse. The Christian response is not to simply give a reason, although there may come a time for that, but to “weep with those who weep” (Romans 12:15) and to show comfort and care to the afflicted (Psalm 82:3).

Caught Off Guard

Not long ago I attended a conference put on by the Reformation Project, which is part of a larger movement committed to reforming the church’s traditional views on homosexuality.¹ My goal was simply to meet people and learn about the movement from the inside. Along with worship, testimonies, and lectures, there were multiple ninety-minute sessions focused on helping people rebut biblical arguments against homosexuality and to make the most compelling case for the compatibility of Christianity and same-sex relationships. These sessions were led by Matthew Vines (*God and the Gay Christian*) and James Brownson (*Bible, Gender, Sexuality*).

Afterward the leaders broke us up into small groups and sent us to classrooms to practice role-playing what we had learned. As the group session started, the teacher went to the front of the class and said, “Before we begin the role-play, it would be great if each of you could share your story of why you are here and why you care so much about this movement.” Inside I was thinking, *You’ve got to be kidding me. How did I get myself into this situation? What should I say?* Fortunately I was fifteenth out of twenty people, so I had some time to think and pray for wisdom.

Even though I had serious theological reservations with the views of others

in the group, I was heartbroken at many of their stories. One young man shared how his church kicked him out when they found out he was gay. Another young woman shared how her parents rejected her when she came out as a lesbian. An older man shared how he had experienced same sex attraction his entire life, and because of his shame, he had never told anyone until last week. He first told his mother when he was about sixty years old. My heart broke for many of these people.

It was finally my turn. I started with: “My name is Sean McDowell and I teach at Biola University.” Many of them must have known about Biola and its conservative biblical stance, since half of them looked at me with an expression of surprise and bewilderment, as if they were wondering, *Who let this guy in here?* I continued, “If you are familiar with Biola, then you probably realize I am not theologically where you want me to be. In fact, I have serious theological reservations about what I am hearing here. But I want to read you something.”

I pulled out the worship packet we were given at registration and read the opening words, “There is love for one like you. There is grace enough to see you through. And wherever you have walked, whatever path you choose, may you know there is love for one like you.” I then asked, “We may disagree theologically, but there’s a place for me here, right?” At that point they had to say yes, or they would have betrayed their message of inclusion and tolerance. And many of them graciously welcomed me.

I went on, “Like you, I am here because the church desperately needs to get this answer right. I have seen the pain firsthand that many of my students and friends with same-sex attraction have experienced. I am here to meet many of you, learn about your views firsthand, and to understand where you are coming from so maybe I can gain some insight about how to best address this issue.”

I paused and then made my final point: “The narrative that is often told is that those who don’t affirm homosexuality are hateful, bigoted, homophobic, and intolerant. I want you to know that this is not always true. There are Christians who have serious reservations about your theology but still love you as people. I am not homophobic or I wouldn’t be here. There are many Christians who deeply care about each one of you. And I am sorry many of you have

experienced such hurt at the hands of believers, but please don't be tempted to think we hate you just because we disagree with your views."

Unfortunately, I had to leave soon afterward to catch a flight. But I have been in touch with a handful of people in that classroom since, and from what I can tell, they were touched by my comments.

A New Kind of Apologist

In our increasingly post-Christian culture, each one of us may find ourselves in a variety of difficult situations. Will we be ready? Will we respond with both grace and truth?

Apologetics has been a staple of the church since the time of Jesus and Paul. More than ever before, we need Christians who will both live and proclaim the Christian worldview. Apologetics is critical for that task. Apologetics is not a spiritual gift for some; it's something we are *all* called to do. As C.S. Lewis said, the question is not if we are apologists, but what kind of apologist will we be.

And yet *how* we do apologetics must change. And that is exactly the goal of this book.

My hope is that you will be challenged and equipped to defend classical Christianity in a manner that is relevant for today. My prayer is that your heart will be broken for the lost, and that your eyes will be opened to seeing how effective and important apologetics is for ministry today. While the gospel message is eternal (Galatians 1:6-9), our methods must adapt. The following characteristics define *a new kind of apologist*:

Humble. Jesus was the first Christian apologist. In John 5–8, Jesus reasoned with the religious leaders of his day, providing multiple lines of evidence that he is the Son of God. And yet, even though he was divine, Jesus willingly humbled himself for the sake of loving others (Philippians 2:5-7). We can do no less.

Relational. While labels can sometimes be helpful, it is easy to depersonalize people by putting them into various boxes. If our labels cause us to ignore the unique personhood of *every* individual, then we need to reexamine how we use them. I work hard to have genuine relationships with people who are atheists, Mormons, agnostics, and a variety of other worldviews. My goal is not

simply to convert them, but I value them as human beings. Apologetics is not an abstract discipline for me, but relates to people I deeply care about. If you want to be a new kind of apologist, it is vital to build relationships with people of varying faiths so you can speak from a heart of genuine care.

Studios. Apologists today must do their homework. We must critically examine our arguments and read both sides of every issue. We must know what we are talking about and do proper research to back up our claims. This younger generation has been raised with endless information in the palm of their hands, and they frequently check the veracity of what they hear. If we make a claim that is not true, our credibility will go out the window. Apologists today must do the hard work of learning a discipline and presenting the truth fairly and accurately.

Practitioner. Authenticity is highly prized among young people. They want to know not only if we can make a good argument, but also if our lives reflect the truth we proclaim. If our lives don't reflect our truth claims, what we say we believe will fall on deaf ears. Thus, prolife apologists must not merely make the case for the value of the unborn, but they must actively care for the vulnerable. Apologists for creation must not only present their arguments, but also help protect creation. We must actively live the truth we proclaim.

There are many more important aspects of being a new kind of apologist. In this book, you will see the intersection between apologetics and important topics such as economics, politics, and race. You will learn how to tackle thorny matters of our day such as the transgender issue and religious liberty. You will gain a model for answering tough questions such as the exclusivity of Christ and new challenges to the Bible. And you will learn practical skills such as having apologetics conversations, asking good questions, using social media, and mentoring the next generation. All of these skills, and more, are important for apologists today.

Are you ready to make a difference in the lives of people? Are you ready to become a new kind of apologist?

As you glean from the wealth of wisdom in the pages that follow, I'm convinced it will help you avoid a repeat of my Breckenridge blunder. And most

importantly, it will equip you to lovingly speak truth to our broken and hurting world.

SEAN MCDOWELL is an assistant professor in the Christian apologetics program at Biola University and a popular speaker at schools, churches, and conferences nationwide. He holds master's degrees in theology and philosophy from Talbot Theological Seminary and a PhD in apologetics and worldview studies from Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. Sean's website, www.seanmcdowell.org, offers his blog, articles, videos, and additional curriculum.

PART 1

A New Approach to Apologetics

SEAN MCDOWELL



Jesus was an apologist. He used logical reasoning to respond to criticism (e.g., Matthew 22:23-32) and he put forth various lines of evidence to demonstrate that he was the Messiah (John 5–8).¹ Along with loving people, healing people, and proclaiming the kingdom of God, Jesus thought it was important to defend the truth of the Scriptures and to provide positive evidence in support of his worldview.

His goal was not simply to win arguments for their own sake. Rather, his greater goal was to see people follow him and to experience eternal life (John 17:1-5). And yet to accomplish this end, Jesus utilized apologetics as one important tool.

Jesus had a unique approach to apologetics, notes the late philosopher Dallas Willard: “Jesus’ aim in utilizing logic is not to win battles, but to achieve

understanding or insight in his hearers...He presents matters in such a way that those who wish to know can find their way to, can come to, the appropriate conclusion as something they have discovered—whether or not it is something they particularly care for.”²

Jesus was much more than an apologist, but he was no less than one. Peter, Paul, and the rest of the apostles utilized apologetics in their early ministry (Acts 2:14-41). And so did many of the early church fathers. My point is simple: *apologetics has been one important staple of the church since its inception.*

And yet today we find ourselves at a unique cultural crossroads. The world is more connected and diverse than ever. While Christianity is growing worldwide, in Western culture, those who embrace the Christian worldview are increasingly labeled hateful, bigoted, and intolerant. How will we respond?

As you will learn in this section, it is more important than ever that the church embrace apologetics. And yet our approach to apologetics must change. We simply cannot keep doing business as we have in the past. Rather than seeing outsiders as enemies, which often creates an “us versus them” mentality, we need to reach out with a posture of humility, generosity, and openness. As Biola University president Barry Corey says, *we need to have a firm center and yet soft edges.*

My prayer is that this section will encourage you to rethink your approach to apologetics. Ultimately, the most important question is: “How would Jesus do apologetics today?” I think you will find some hints in the following chapters.

Christians in the Argument Culture: Apologetics as Conversation

TIM MUEHLHOFF

What's stopping you?"

During a training session for those interested in apologetics, I asked if anyone knew of family members, classmates, or coworkers who did not have a relationship with Jesus. Hands went up throughout the audience.

"What's stopping you from sharing the Christian perspective with them?" I asked. When I present this question to audiences, several responses surface. Some answer, "I tried to bring up God with a family member, but he quickly became defensive, so I changed the subject. I have yet to bring up the issue again." Others, "I imagine having a conversation with a coworker, but always envision it going poorly. I continually psych myself out." Last, and most common, "I have no idea how to organize such a potentially explosive conversation."

Can you relate?

Is there someone you want to share the Christian perspective with but have

yet to do it? If so, what's stopping you? Have you psyched yourself out or just lack a clear strategy for how to engage?

Most of us—through participating in social media or watching cable news shows—are aware of the *argument culture*, which Georgetown University linguist Deborah Tannen defines as a pervasive war-like atmosphere that makes us approach anything as if it were a verbal fight. “The argument culture urges us to regard the world—and the people in it—in an adversarial frame of mind.”¹ Regularly witnessing such incivility makes us want no part of contentious conversations, so we get into the habit of ignoring certain topics.

For the past couple of years, as I have watched our culture simultaneously lose the ability to have respectful conversations *and* become more hostile to Christian beliefs,² I have found myself wrestling with perplexing questions:

How can I remain faithful to my convictions but communicate in a way that produces dialogue, not uncivil debate?

How can I balance truth and love when discussing my worldview with people who disagree with me?

What if the person I'm struggling with is a spouse, family member, coworker, or neighbor? Can I protect our relationship while sharing a worldview people increasingly find offensive?

Most importantly, where can I look for guidance?

I found the communication principles I needed in the book of Proverbs. This unique book is the collective counsel of teachers to their students. Israel's teachers were watching their best and brightest leave to take leadership positions in Jerusalem. This move put young Israelite men in touch with non-Israelites who did not share the sacred beliefs of the Jewish community. The writers of Proverbs faced the same challenge we do: How do we prepare individuals to meet and engage people whose beliefs are radically different from our own? These wise teachers knew they could not write a script for every interpersonal situation their pupils would encounter. People then were too diverse, just as they are now. Instead, they carefully crafted broad principles and sayings, which we can use today.

These proverbial principles are expressed in four essential questions that we

must ask during a conversation with someone whose beliefs are different from our own.

Question 1: What does this person believe?

Proverbs 18:13 (NASB) states that “He who gives an answer before he hears, it is folly and shame to him.” In almost every personal interaction mentioned in Proverbs, the first step is listening. Why is listening so crucial? Because to neglect it is to respond to a person in both folly (speaking without knowing all the facts) or shame (treating the person as an inferior). Rather than talking prematurely, the wise conversationalist will “store up knowledge” (10:14 NASB). The importance of listening cannot be overstated. Before you respond to a person find out *exactly* what he or she believes.

Many Christians, however, view listening as an unnecessary and unwelcome step in sharing the Christian worldview. Humorist Dave Barry made this stinging observation about people who are eager to start religious conversations: “People who want to share their religious views with you almost never want you to share yours with them.”³

Why is that? In apologetic conversations, why do we Christians usually find ourselves doing most of the talking?

I think most of us suffer from what one communication scholar described as “agenda anxiety,” which he defines as the overwhelming anxiety to “get across all points” of a subject regardless of the spiritual state of the person we are speaking with.⁴ Let’s face it, most of us struggle with guilt at having not said more concerning spiritual issues with friends and family, and we desire to relieve that guilt by sharing *everything* we’ve always wanted to say about God in one conversation. The problem is “one can be satisfied with his coverage of content and still fail to communicate.”⁵

In the end, listening is sacrificed when so much needs to be explained and opportunities are few and far between. To listen to a person will require that we temporarily set aside our objections to what a person is saying and allow him or her to speak openly without fear of being challenged. After listening to a person’s perspective, we need to dig even deeper.

Question 2: Why does this person believe?

Scholars at the Harvard Negotiation Project have served as mediators in thousands of difficult cases. They argue that when we discuss differences, most of us make the mistake of only trading conclusions, not how we *arrived* at those conclusions. In the heat of the moment, we merely give another person the bottom line of our convictions, not the backstory of how those convictions developed.

Proverbs 16:25 (NIV) tells us, “There is a way that appears to be right, but in the end it leads to death.” During this crucial step in the conversation, we need to resist the urge to explain to a person why we think his position will lead to intellectual or spiritual death. Rather, we need to first understand *why* this way seems right to him. What a person believes is deeply entwined with his or her personal and social history. The goal is to understand why a person has embraced convictions or behaviors we find unreasonable or offensive.

Psychologist and gender scholar Carol Gilligan states, “you cannot take a life out of history.”⁶ All of our convictions and passions have a history to them that can be traced back to the influences of our family, personal experiences, and influential people.

All three of these influences were on display with the death of Steve Jobs. While Jobs is considered one of our finest American inventors, his perfectionism and bouts of anger made it nearly impossible to work with him resulting in his once being fired by the very company he created. Understanding what fueled his anger and impossible standards would have been crucial in attempting to engage him. Biographer, Jeff Goodall, after being given unprecedented access to Jobs in the last years of his life, offers this insight:

The central trauma of his life, after all, was being given up for adoption by his parents, and now he was being kicked out of his second family, the company he founded. A close friend once speculated to me that Steve’s drive came from a deep desire to prove that his parents were wrong to give him up. A desire, in short, to be loved—or, more precisely, a desire to prove that he was somebody worth loving.⁷

What impact does it have on you to know that what in part undergirded Job's perfectionism and anger was not narcissism but the desire of an adopted kid to prove to himself and others he was worthy of love? How much would this insight change how you interacted with him?

If we want to effectively engage people from differing perspectives, we must first create thick, not thin, impressions by asking: "When did you first start to think this way?" "Who has influenced your thinking the most concerning this issue?" "What books or movies have shaped your perspective?" "Does your perspective deviate from your parents' perspective?"

The next question is perhaps the most neglected by Christian apologists.

Question 3: Where do we agree?

The book of Proverbs extols wisdom and encourages its readers to pursue it at all costs. Wisdom is personified as a woman calling above the roar of a busy street inviting all to come to her. The writers of Proverbs firmly believed that her voice could be found not only in Israel but far beyond her borders as well. That is why the words of two non-Israelite leaders, Augur (chapter 30) and Lemuel (chapter 31), appear in the inspired book of Proverbs. "All truth belonged to and ultimately derived from their Lord no matter who experienced and expressed it," suggests Old Testament scholar David Hubbard.⁸

The greatest skill needed by Christians in today's argument culture will not be the ability to debate but the ability to recognize and affirm God's truth buried in the perspectives of our neighbors and friends. In today's vitriolic communication climate, differences will be apparent; it will take skill to cultivate common ground. Like the writers of Proverbs, we need to seek out and affirm God's truth in each perspective we encounter. My ability to discover where a person's worldview overlaps with the Christian worldview often depends on where I focus the conversation. Do I focus on a person's questions or on his or her answer?

Students taking my introduction to communication theory class are surprised to see one particular textbook: the Qur'an. They are even more surprised when they learn that the first assignment isn't to attack it but to find common

ground. Even though most have never read the Qur'an, they are convinced there can't possibly be agreement between it and the Bible. To start their assignment I share a quote from C.S. Lewis: "The man who agrees with us that some question, little regarded by others, is of great importance can be our friend. He need not agree with us about some answer."⁹

As they begin reading, students soon learn that while the two faith traditions often have differing answers,¹⁰ they ask and value similar questions. "What is God like?" "Who is Jesus?" "What is our responsibility to the poor?" "What is the role of prayer?" "Is there an afterlife?" "Is there a final judgment?" "If so, how can one be saved?"

Focusing on common questions allows us to recognize our similarities while probing our real differences.

Question 4: Based on this knowledge, how should I proceed?

What should the Christian communicator do once he or she has listened and cultivated common ground? In other words, what should you do when it's your turn? The answer in part comes in the book of Proverbs' careful description of how a discerning person sets out to build a house of wisdom. "By wisdom a house is built, and by understanding it is established; and by knowledge the rooms are filled with all precious and pleasant riches" (Proverbs 24:3-4 NASB). This proverb mirrors the communication strategy we have been considering. In step one, by asking, "What do they believe?" we are gathering *knowledge*—facts, information, beliefs, and convictions. In steps two and three, the answers to "Why do they believe?" and "Where do we agree?" help us prioritize facts and cultivate common ground, which is the foundation of true *understanding*. Step four requires that we allow our personal communication to be molded by *wisdom*—in this case, the artful application of knowledge and understanding to people.

Step four requires that we ask the oft-neglected question: "With this person, at this time, under these circumstances, what is the one thing I should say?" Notice the question asks what is the *next thing*, not three or four things, you want to say. When teaching this method to others, I force them to identify

a single communication goal—to rebut, clarify, cultivate more common ground, gather more information, affirm the relationship, or set up the next conversation.

When I was in grad school first developing this strategy, I had a memorable opportunity to apply this question. During a public speaking course, a young woman began her speech by lifting up a Bible and saying, “The holy Word of God.” She then threw it on the floor and proceeded to kick it across the room. With each kick pages were sent flying. In her speech, with powerful emotions surfacing, she argued that the Bible was an intolerant book that had emotionally damaged thousands of individuals. When she finished, all eyes turned toward me. How would their self-professed Christian professor respond? How would you respond in such a situation?

I was angry and insulted. I sat there, eyes looking down on some incoherent notes scribbled on a legal pad. Then, God powerfully brought to mind Proverb 12:16: “Fools show their annoyance at once, but the prudent overlook an insult.” Still not looking up, I thought to myself, *At this time (class is almost over), under these circumstances (roomful of watchful students), with this woman (I didn’t know her well), what should be the one thing I say?* I chose to dig deeper rather than challenge her harsh claim about the Bible.

I applauded her for the passion she put into her presentation. I asked her where the passion came from. What had happened in her life to foster such anger? She told the class that last year her younger sister had courageously confessed to being gay. Her small church responded by excommunicating her on Christmas Eve. You could see the hurt and anger etched on her face. Along with the class, I sat and listened as the period ended. By temporarily overlooking her offensive actions, I had preserved the relationship for future interaction.

I wish I could say that I always respond in such a way toward those who belittle or attack things dear to me. I don’t. Sometimes I surprise myself how easily I respond to anger with anger or I choose debate over listening. And yet, I find that the four questions explored in this chapter give me tracks to run on when engaging situations such as this one.

The Power of Communication

As followers of Christ, we are desperate to share our story with a world that seems to be rapidly moving away from God. However, in our zeal we forget that communication is a give-and-take proposition, a right to be earned. The communication strategy we have been considering is grounded on the central presupposition of the book of Proverbs—our personal actions operate according to a cause-and-effect pattern. Theologian Cornelius Plantinga describes this universal pattern:

Like yields like. You get back what you put in. What goes around comes around...No matter what we sow, the law of return applies. Good or evil, love or hate, justice or tyranny, grapes or thorns, a gracious compliment or a peevish complaint—whatever we invest, we tend to get it back with interest. Lovers are loved; haters, hated.¹¹

If we want our friends and neighbors to listen to *our* story, then we must listen to theirs. If we want others to attend to *our* convictions, then we must first attend to theirs. If we desire for others to cultivate common ground with us, we must do so *first*. In doing so, we will create a communication climate in which we can fulfill our deepest longing—engaging others in a respectful, civil way that allows us to share a perspective that has changed our lives.

TIM MUEHLHOFF (PhD, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill) is a professor of communication at Biola University in La Mirada, California. He is the author of *I Beg to Differ: Navigating Difficult Conversations in Truth and Love*; *Authentic Communication: Christian Speech Engaging Culture*; and *The God Conversation: Using Illustrations to Explain your Faith* (coauthored with J.P. Moreland).