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APOLOGETICS FOR AN EVER-CHANGING CULTURE

**SEAN
McDOWELL**

GENERAL EDITOR

FOREWORD BY DAVID KINNAMAN, BARNA GROUP CEO

APOLOGETICS

FOR AN

EVER-CHANGING

CULTURE

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Apologetics for an Ever-Changing Culture

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*This book is dedicated to a new generation of apologists.
May you “contend for the faith” in your
generation, as countless others have before.*

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FOREWORD

David Kinnaman



The book you are holding is timely. Ultimately, it is about passing on the faith—passing on our faith in Jesus to the next generation. Our research at Barna, and perhaps your own experience, shows this to be one of the great challenges facing the church today.

There are few things that spark my personal passion more than *faithfully* passing on the faith. I am grateful that my colleague and friend Sean McDowell has asked me to make a small contribution to this volume. You're about to dive into a treasure trove of stimulating essays from amazing thinkers, apologists, writers, and leaders. Most importantly, you should know that we all love Jesus. We desire to see those closest to us, including our own children and grandchildren, come alive to Jesus in all parts of their lives—heart, mind, body, and soul.

On that theme, I've been reading and rereading 2 Timothy 1, in which Paul reminds his young protégé of some foundational realities. As is true for all of Scripture, I believe we witness something here that is both contextual *and* universal—we see inside the relationship between Paul and Timothy, and we also gain insights about how to think about apologetics for an ever-changing culture.

Following are some of the lessons I notice. What about you?

First, the affection that Paul has for Timothy is on full display. Paul calls him “my dear son” (verse 2 NIV). He discloses his near-constant prayers for Timothy and, in what seems especially rare today from older adults and mentors, Paul says he is *grateful* for Timothy (verse 3). He also recounts with deep tenderness his sadness at their last parting and anticipates joy at their next meeting (verse 4).

If we zoom out, we notice that truth is best conveyed and received in the context of a trusting relationship. Paul cares deeply for this young man and his concerns nearly bleed through the page. Try reading this section of Scripture and fill in the names with those of your own family. Imagine it’s a letter you’re writing (or receiving) from someone dear to you. It’s tough not to feel the same emotional vulnerability Paul expresses toward Timothy.

Second, Paul reminds Timothy of his spiritual heritage and legacy, including his grandmother Lois and his mother Eunice (verse 5). It’s fascinating to me that Paul mentions only women in this heritage. And it’s a reminder that women generate much of the warmth that young people need to grow spiritually. Our research at Barna backs this up. Don’t get me wrong, we need both men and women in the lives of young people. Yet each play a vital role, and we see that legacy from Lois and Eunice.

In verse 5, we also find this: We would do well to help young people—a generation that oozes self-made reliance—realize that the most important things about them (their family, genetics, passions, place in history, and so on) are not chosen by themselves, but by God. Paul communicates this same thing to Timothy. Paul gives him a sense of *place* in the grand story of Jesus. Storytelling, as you’ll learn from screenwriter Brian Godawa, is not subordinate to other approaches to apologetics.

Third, directly after this reminder of his background (and c’mon, Paul is giving major don’t-make-me-tattle-to-your-mama-and-grandmama vibes), Timothy is asked to recall his ministry commissioning. Apparently, at some earlier point, Paul had spoken words of affirmation and giftedness to Timothy. In verse 6, Paul says to “fan into flames” the passions and gifts the Lord revealed at that special moment in Timothy’s life. Paul even laid hands on him and prayed for Jesus to work through him. Here, I think we learn that

young people need purpose, and to be part of something as grand and as world changing as gospel work. This involves identifying and calling out gifts, commissioning for work, and continual encouragement to be all they were made to be.

Finally, Paul reassures Timothy with words that clearly convey both contextual and universal potency:

God has not given us a spirit of fear and timidity, but of power, love, and self-discipline (verse 7).

Recently, I was shocked to realize that this incredible verse—one I memorized as a teenager myself—was wrapped in the sage advice of a mentor. The words are not just abstract peace of mind; they were given in the context of the personal relationship Paul had with Timothy. *Don't stress yourself out. You're going to be more than okay! You belong to something bigger than yourself. Your gifts are given for the purpose of advancing the church.*

This verse echoes through the ages to speak to today's culture of anxiety and an "anxious generation." Paul knew that Timothy needed reassurance, and the Holy Spirit knew that we would need the same thing today. In addition to our prayers, our gratitude and our affection, and on top of understanding our place and our purpose, the Word of God reminds us that we can experience peace.

At Barna, we recently launched *The Open Generation* study, a global research project conducted with nearly 25,000 teenagers in 26 countries. We learned, among many other things, that helping teenagers find inner peace is a new apologetic. They are desperate for that kind of peace found only in Jesus. We can help stressed-out, eager-to-please, ambitious young people to be disciplined in the way of the Prince of Peace.

We are raising young people in a time of confusion and chaos. Various forces in our society are giving voice to demonic ideas of identity and self-expression. In the face of daunting pressures, we can help the young disciples around us to find quiet, purposeful conviction in Jesus, who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life (see John 14:6).

If we can have a light moment together, 2 Timothy 1 calls to mind a scene

from *The Lion King* in which Mufasa appears to his son Simba during a thunderstorm one night. Simba is lost and rudderless after his father's death. The presence of Mufasa rumbles over the savannah in the roiling clouds and whipping winds, encouraging Simba to remember exactly who he is.

The excellent book that you're holding is one way to help us remember who we are and who we serve. This volume enables us to help the young people in our lives as they learn to trust and follow Jesus. I benefitted from the breadth of these essays. And I deeply appreciate the hard-won insights that these writers have shared here. (I was moved to tears as I read the real-life honesty of Josh McDowell's piece.)

When we embody the multitude of lessons in this book, I hope it moves us closer to the kind of model Paul displayed with Timothy—one filled with prayer, exuding warmth, robust in connection and gratitude, that propels toward purpose and peace, and that convinces of the necessity of the gospel mission.

In contrast to merely passing on a dry, dusty, and irrelevant faith, I believe this book will help you, as it did me, to remember who all people are in Christ and our unending need to know Him!

David Kinnaman
CEO, Barna Group
September 2024

INTRODUCTION

APOLOGETICS FOR AN EVER-CHANGING CULTURE

Sean McDowell



People often ask me why I became an apologist. Undoubtedly, having a father as an apologist influenced me profoundly. But as a grad student in philosophy and theology, there were also three things that I believed deeply that steered me toward apologetics. First, I loved working with high school and college-aged students. Second, the students I met had a lot of questions about God, morality, and religion. Third, as far as I could tell, not many people were helping young people address these big questions effectively. The more I reflected, prayed, and sought counsel, the more it became clear that there was a big need for apologetics, *and* I had a passion for doing it. So I became an apologist.

I started by teaching apologetics at a Christian high school in Southern California. At the time, there were many Christians claiming that apologetics was no longer important. Many leaders in the “emerging church” movement made statements like these:

We live in a postmodern era, so apologetics is not important anymore.

Young people no longer care about reasons for the existence of the Christian God. What matters is telling your narrative and being authentic.

New generations today no longer need “evidence that demands a verdict” or a “case for Christ.”

Conversion is about the heart, not the intellect.

I have worked with high school students for roughly a quarter century and can say that these sentiments were devastatingly wrong. While culture has shifted radically since the early 2000s, and some different issues have arisen, we need apologetics training in the church today more than ever. Let me say that again, to make sure it sinks in: *We need apologetics training in the church today more than ever.*

To say that apologetics is critical for ministry today is not to say that Christians just continue business as usual. That would be foolish. Our world is changing, and it is changing *rapidly*. But God does not change (Malachi 3:6), and neither does human nature. Humans are thoughtful and rational beings who respond to evidence. People have questions, and we are all responsible to provide helpful answers. Of course, we certainly don’t have all the answers and when we do provide solid answers, many choose not to follow the evidence for personal or moral reasons. But that hardly changes the fact that we are rational, personal beings who bear the image of God.

People often confuse apologetics with apologizing for the faith, but the Greek word *apologia* refers to a legal defense. Thus, apologetics involves giving a rational defense for the Christian faith. First Peter 3:15 says, “Sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense [*apologia*] to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, but with gentleness and respect” (NASB). Jude encouraged his hearers to “contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all handed down to the saints” (Jude 3 NASB1995). The biblical evidence is clear: All Christians are to be trained in apologetics, which is an integral part of discipleship. This involves learning how to respond to common objections raised against the Christian faith and how to positively commend the gospel to a particular audience.

Christians have certainly made mistakes in the way we have defended our beliefs in the past (as chapters in this book will illustrate), but this hardly means we should abandon apologetics altogether. Rather, we ought to learn from the past and do better today. Beyond the biblical mandate, apologetics is vitally important today for two reasons.

Strengthening Believers

The first reason is to fortify faith. For about a dozen years, I took high school students on apologetics mission trips to engage atheists, Mormons, and Muslims. These trips were first inspired by my friend Brett Kunkle, who still leads numerous apologetics trips with his team at MAVEN (see his chapter “Truth Never Gets Old”). One year, right after returning from a mission trip to Salt Lake City, I got a call from one of my students. He had a tough apologetics question for me. But why was he calling me on a Saturday? Couldn’t it wait? Nope! He was in a conversation with two missionaries from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. His willingness to reach out to them flowed from the confident faith he developed from his training in apologetics.

Apologetics also helps students withstand challenges to their faith. It is no secret that many Christians, including *young* Christians, are leaving the church. According to the authors of *The Great Dechurching*, “More people have left the church in the last twenty-five years than all the new people who became Christians from the First Great Awakening, Second Great Awakening, and Billy Graham crusades *combined*.”¹ This trend has continued to increase since the mid-1990s.² While there are many reasons people disengage from the church, one common reason is that people are talked out of believing that Christianity is true. Why sacrifice time and money—and *sleep*—if you think Christianity is a fairy tale?

Christian students are being bombarded with anti-Christian messages on social media, in the classroom, and from their friends. While “deconstruction” can often be a positive way of aligning one’s faith more closely with scripture,³ there is also a significant trend of social media influencers trying to “help” Christians deconstruct *away from the historic Christian faith*.⁴ How do we help them resist some of the secular ideas permeating our culture? How do we help them stand strong in their faith and not abandon it?

Apologetics training must be part of our parenting and discipleship with the next generation (for help in this area, see the chapters by Natasha Crain and Alex McFarland).

Reaching the Lost

The second reason apologetics is vital today is for evangelism. The apostles of Christ ministered in a pluralistic culture. They regularly reasoned with both Jews and pagans, trying to persuade them of the truth of Christianity. They appealed to fulfilled prophecy, Jesus' miracles, evidence for creation, and proofs for the resurrection. Acts 17:2-3 says, "According to Paul's custom, he went to them, and for three Sabbaths reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and giving evidence that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead, and saying, 'This Jesus whom I am proclaiming to you is the Christ'" (NASBI995). Some were persuaded as a result of Paul's efforts.

We live in an increasingly pluralistic world today. And yet, there is an openness to Jesus in this generation.⁵ Does this mean young people are walking around with deep spiritual questions at the forefront of their minds? Not necessarily. But it does mean that many young people are open to Christianity when motivated in the right way. The key question is how we might use apologetics to engage people to consider the claims of Christ. If done in the context of a relationship, and with the right attitude and approach, apologetics can be one effective means of helping remove intellectual barriers people have to the Christian faith. It is one vital tool for reaching the lost.

Effective Apologetics in Our Ever-changing Culture

Apologetics is clearly important today. But what must characterize apologetics in our current cultural moment? Allow me to offer two suggestions.

Apologetics Today Must Be Motivated by Love

The point of studying apologetics is not merely to gain knowledge. The point of apologetics is not simply to build up our faith. While these are important, the point of apologetics is to better love God and love others. Although it may seem counterintuitive—since apologists often enjoy debate—apologetics is a ministry of loving Christians by helping them build a stronger faith and

loving nonbelievers by helping them remove intellectual barriers to faith. Forgetting this goal is what often leads to a failure to honor Christ in our witness.

This is something I try to model on my YouTube channel. While most of my guests are evangelicals, I have also had progressive Christians, agnostics, atheists, Muslims, Mormons, LGBTQ advocates, and many others on the channel. My goal is not to win the argument. My biggest goal is to be loving toward my guest. Sometimes that involves pushing back on ideas, but many times it involves listening well, respecting their views, treating them with kindness, and looking for common ground. I want them to leave feeling truly understood and valued. While there is still need for formal debates, and I engage in them now and then, many people yearn for civil, gracious dialogue across worldview differences. Christians can lead the way by engaging their neighbors with kindness and charity (for a strategy on how to do this, see the chapter by Tim Muehlhoff).

Let me sum it up: If you write an apologetics book but have not love, you have *nothing*. If you get a huge social media following defending the Christian faith but have not love, you have *nothing*. If you defeat non-Christians in an argument but have not love, you have *nothing*. Love is what matters most.

Apologetics Today Must Be Humble

I failed miserably to act humbly a few years ago when getting my hair cut in Breckenridge, Colorado. The hairdresser noticed I was carrying a Christian book, so she asked, “Are you a Christian? If so, how can you explain all the evil in the world?” I had just graduated from Biola and received an A in Introduction to Apologetics, so I was ready with an answer! Unfortunately, I proceeded to give her a ten-minute lecture about the origin of evil, the nature of free will, and the Christian solution. I unloaded my apologetics onto her. My arguments may have been decent, but I lacked humility and sensitivity in my demeanor. I had a slick answer to her every question, but I missed the fact that her needs went beyond the intellect, to her heart. Eventually she started crying—not because she became a Christian but because she was so offended by my callousness and arrogance.

In retrospect, I wish I had responded with a question such as this: “Of all the questions you can ask about God, why that one?” While questions about

evil and suffering might be intellectually motivated, in my experience, such questions are often motivated by personal hurt. Was she bullied as a kid? Did her parents recently divorce? Did she have a loved one dying of cancer? Had she experienced church abuse? I will never know because I didn't ask. I wish I could rewind the clock and engage her with more humility and curiosity.

What might it look like to be a humble apologist? Consider a few suggestions. Listen more than you talk. Ask questions more than you make statements. Admit when you are wrong. Don't overstate an argument. Apologize when you offend someone. Be willing to concede if you don't have an answer. Have a prayerful spirit.



There are many other ways to do effective apologetics today. But there is a reason why you got this book! *Apologetics for an Ever-Changing Culture* is unique. It explores fresh topics from an apologetics standpoint, including mental health, critical theory, deconstruction, and urban ministry. It is also practical. This is not a *why* book but a *how* book. Contributors don't focus on answering difficult questions, but on strategies for doing apologetics with your friends, family, neighbors, coworkers, and online. This book is also diverse. Its contributors include men and women, people from different theological backgrounds, and apologists from different generations, places, and races. This book can be used for individual study, in the classroom, for small groups, or as a discussion starter for church and ministry staff. This book is substantially different from the earlier book *Apologetics for a New Generation*, all the interviews are new, existing chapters have been updated significantly, and there are a dozen completely new chapters.

The Apologetics Renaissance

One final word of encouragement. While there are arguably more people doing apologetics than ever before in history, we need *you* to join the cause. Every apologist matters. Whether it is teaching a class at your church, having a conversation with a skeptic online, or starting a YouTube channel focused on apologetics—every contribution matters. The good news is that we are living during an apologetics renaissance. This can be seen in the number of

apologetics conferences that have sprouted up in churches all over the country, the growth in apologetics books and resources, and the explosion of apologetics content on YouTube and other forms of social media. Novel and powerful apologetic works are being published in the areas of the historical Jesus, near-death experiences, philosophical theology, the abortion debate, and the existence of the soul.⁶ This is good news because America and the church continue to become more and more secular. And in response, the church desperately needs to be equipped.

Os Guinness is one of my favorite thinkers. One time, while interviewing him for the *Think Biblically* podcast, I asked him this question: “Os, what do you think your legacy will be?” I will *never* forget his response. Without hesitation, he said, “Sean, legacy is a secular idea. All that matters is that God says at the end of your life, ‘Well done, my good and faithful servant.’” His response goes through my mind almost every day. Don’t worry about results. Don’t compare yourself to others. Simply aim to please the Lord. Faithfulness is what matters most. This book is merely a tool to help you be a faithful apologist. Let’s go!

Sean McDowell

An abstract, monochromatic illustration of a cityscape composed of various geometric shapes like cubes, prisms, and rectangles. The shapes are layered to create a sense of depth and perspective. Some shapes feature patterns such as grids of small squares or wavy lines. The overall style is modern and architectural.

PART 1: NEW CULTURE

A DIFFERENT KIND OF APOLOGIST

Dan Kimball



Apologetics is desperately, urgently, and critically needed more than ever before in our ever-changing culture. In my thirty plus years of serving in ministry, I have never seen more confusion and misinformation about the Christian faith among younger generations. The amount of intentional teaching against the historic Christian faith seems unprecedented. Because of all this, we need to be more bold, more clear, more aggressive, and more passionate to see the truths of Scripture be taught to new generations. This isn't the time to back down or avoid engaging the tough theological and sensitive cultural questions of our day. Yet because our culture is shifting so quickly, we must wisely think through our strategy of doing apologetics today. We need to consider this question: What does a new kind of apologist look like for today?

For New Generations to Hear the Truth, Attention to Tone Is Necessary

I once attended a Christian event that included a dialogue with opposing presentations on a vital theological issue. The speaker who represented

historic Christian doctrine was correct in his conclusions, but he came across somewhat smug in his tone and attitude, and took an overly confident just-the-facts approach. He also subtly mocked those who believed differently.

The other speaker, who I totally disagreed with, gave some good-sounding arguments and shared the compelling stories of people hurt through their Christian upbringing. His tone was gentle, and he intentionally related to the people in the stories, showing empathy for those who have faith struggles and doubts. He shared that he does not believe Jesus wants to see His followers be divisive, and cause so much pain and hurt in people through “theology.” He said, what is now so cliché, that Jesus doesn’t want His followers to be known for what they are against or for hurting people with their beliefs. He presented on how Jesus is about love, inclusion, and acceptance, not division and hatred.

The second speaker sure seemed to persuade the hearts of those in the room. After all, who wants to be known for what they stand against, or to be viewed by others as hateful? As I sat there, next to a young church leader who was also attending the conference, he leaned over and said something I will never forget: “I think I agree with that guy [the theologically conservative one], but he’s so blunt and mean sounding, I want to go hang out with the other guy [the theologically progressive one], who seems really nice and caring.”

Now, the church leader next to me was mature enough to discern that the truth is far more important than the way something is presented and the tone in which it is delivered. Someone can be “nice” but be totally wrong, teaching destructive and evil beliefs. If you have a background in knowing the Scriptures or even studying basic theology, you are more able to easily discern when someone is teaching something contrary to biblical truth. But what about the many individuals in recent generations who can be swayed by emotions and are less biblically trained?

I imagine that quite possibly many in the room that day were more won over by the progressive liberal speaker than the traditional conservative one. I wish it wasn’t this way, but many younger generations (and really *all* generations) are more easily drawn to what is attractive and relatable rather than to what is true.

He Made Me Feel that I Am a Stupid Person for Being an Atheist

Another quick example comes from my church. There was a college-age girl who wasn't a Christian, but she was interested in exploring who Jesus is. She was an atheist who was open for discussion. I asked her if she would be willing to read an apologetics book that addresses atheist claims against Christianity. It was a super helpful book to me, so I eagerly wanted her to read it. She said yes, and I enthusiastically gave her the book. However, a week later, she returned the book. I asked her what she thought about it, and she said, "I stopped reading it after a few chapters. The author was basically saying that all atheists are stupid." She shared that the author used negative generalizations of and stereotypes for atheists (which touched her personally), and this made her not want to read any further.

After this girl told me about how the book made her feel, I reread it, but this time through the lens of a non-Christian. Sure enough, I could see what she was saying. The author of the book gave compelling arguments, but it was written to an already-Christian audience. The Christian terminology inside lacked definitions. There was a lot of wording with a "those atheists" type of framing. Although I am sure that the author of the apologetics book didn't intentionally do this, I can see why this young girl was turned off. The tone, attitude, and stereotypes that were used repelled her. Ironically, the book's goal is to help atheists want to follow Jesus, but sadly, the exact opposite happened.

It Is a Time for Clarity, Boldness, and Not Avoiding the Difficult Topics. But...

Now you may be thinking, *Well of course she didn't like what she read. Someone who doesn't believe the truth won't want to hear the truth.* I disagree. She wanted to learn, and we have since had many great conversations. But in today's world, as we use apologetics, we need to understand the cultural changes that have occurred that have caused a shift in what is viewed as important. The minds, emotions, and values of new generations are swayed not only by the truths we have, but *how* we state them. The issue isn't that many are not open to hearing truth; the issue is how we go about speaking the truth to them.

This is very important: When I say "new generations," I am not talking

about the youth and young adults in your church who are already Christians or who go to apologetic events. I am not thinking of the teens or college aged in your Bible studies who light up when you start explaining reasons to believe in God, or the Bible, or answering some tough questions. They will enthusiastically welcome apologetic truths that build their confidence.

The new generations I am primarily talking about are those who don't know Jesus yet. Their parents likely have never been part of a church (which is increasingly normal today). These new generations are made up of young people whose only exposure to Jesus and the Christian faith has been through bits and pieces of Christian beliefs. And likely, they are already familiar with Christianity being portrayed on social media through messages like: "How Christians have misused the Bible to control and oppress women" and "The Christian Bible is pro-slavery and filled with violence." I am thinking of new generations who are getting saturated on social media by "ex-Christians" who are very aggressively trying to steer them away from the "evangelical cult" they were once a part of. I am talking about new generations who may have never attended a youth group or a church, but who occasionally hear about a scandal surrounding some Christian leader on the news.

Christians need apologetics as a way to have their confidence boosted in what they believe. We want to be proactively training new generations with ways to respond to the mass of criticism against the Bible in advance of when they hear the arguments. This way, they are prepared and will not be caught off guard when they hear new challenges. Thus, we critically do need to be teaching apologetics in our churches and filling up the church van to drive to apologetics events. But if we also want to be using apologetics with new generations who aren't yet Christians, or with those who may be doubting, or who are leaving the faith due to peer pressure and the teaching of "ex-Christians" on social media, we need to become a new kind of apologist. One which, actually, isn't anything new. It simply means practicing what Peter laid out in the classic New Testament passage beloved by apologists:

In your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping

a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander (1 Peter 3:15-16 NIV).

In apologetics, we often focus on “Always be prepared to give an answer.” We can fully prepare answers to the toughest questions, and we absolutely need to do that. But the verse continues, “...to everyone who asks you.” I’ve never had a total stranger walk up to me on the street and say, “Excuse me, I’d like to know the answer for the hope that you have.” So the indication here is that there is some type of trust already present when a person is asking you. And then, of course, Peter says to give our answers “with gentleness and respect.” Apologists all know the first part of this verse, but in today’s world especially, we need to be paying attention to the whole verse.

It Is Sometimes Harder for Those Drawn to Apologetics to Think Tone Is Important

Due to the nature of apologetics, those often drawn to the discipline (myself included) have temperaments that are primarily facts driven. We are inclined to value the concrete data, the hard facts, the bare truth, and to be able to follow the trail of logic in someone’s argument. But we must remember, people are not driven solely, or even primarily, by facts. As time marches forward, an increasing number of people are born into and entirely raised in a culturally post-truth, emotions-led, follow-your-heart world.

There is a common saying: “Facts don’t care about your feelings.” Which is true! Facts remain true no matter what our feelings are. Yet, in order to share the facts with people in a way that they will truly listen, we need to pay attention to their feelings. The tone we use is one of our most important assets when connecting the truth found in Scripture to someone’s feelings.

In New Generations, Social Contagions Rule What Is Considered True and False

We see the madness every day, when social media amplifies the spread of false teaching, false narratives of history, and false theologies. It happens non-stop, and is just one click away. I don’t know what else to call it but madness,

although I do believe there is an enemy behind the deception that is happening (Ephesians 6:10-11; 1 Peter 5:8-9; Revelation 12:9).

Younger generations who crave community and a place to have identity, are accepted into groups that ignite their beliefs in conformity to the group because it *feels* right. Products are marketed to people by emphasizing how someone will feel if they were to buy it. Feeling the “right” way about something, as determined by the voices around us, is what makes something “true.”

Thinking Through a New Kind of Apologist Lens

There is a nationally known college campus ministry that has used a diagram of a train to illustrate that Christians need to be led by the facts and what is true, instead of being led by their feelings.

The facts (the train’s engine) are the truths found in Scripture. When we have the facts correct, then our faith (the fuel car) develops from and follows the facts. And that, then, impacts our feelings (the caboose) which are following along the same path as our faith and the facts. The train is laid out like this:



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However, in a world driven by image, saturated by social media, led by emotions, and influenced by the message to “follow your heart,” it becomes our feelings that sway us into believing what is true or not. People are reorienting their lives in a way that structures the train in the reverse order—**Feeling-Faith-Fact**. Individuals are placing their feelings as their engine, while faith and facts follow behind powerless to influence the driving force that has been placed in control—their emotions.

Again, I wish this wasn’t the case. And there are still some “just-give-me-the-facts” young people out there for sure. (If you are an apologist type, you likely

already hang out with them as well.) But I want to pose the question to you right now: *Which of the two trains would you say you personally relate to more?*

Knowing Who We Are Talking to Is Critical for Apologetics

I was talking to someone who has dedicated their life to apologetics and teaches apologetics at conferences. I asked him some questions about how non-Christians respond to him. He paused, and then he said something fascinating. He reflected that as he has been teaching apologetics, seemingly only Christians show up to the classes and seminars. He hasn't actually been in a relational dialogue using apologetics with a non-Christian in a long time—he couldn't even remember the last time.

Another question for you right now: *As much as you love apologetics, when was the last time you have been in an actual conversation with a non-Christian about the Christian faith?*

If we are surrounded only by Christians in our daily lives, we may become so ingrained that we lose our sensitivity to and awareness of the mindsets of those who aren't believers in Christ. Let's consider three categories of people apologists encounter:

1. Believers in Jesus who trust the apologist and want support for what he or she already believes.



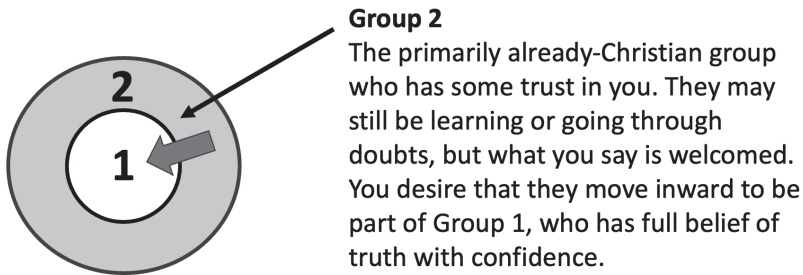
Group 1

The already-Christian group who cheer and applaud when apologetics are applied, and who accept and believe biblical truths.

The people in Group 1 come from a core group of already Christians who have been taught strong biblical beliefs and who hold to a worldview that is generally aligned with Scripture. They will trust the speaker, who is presenting apologetics, and are eager to learn more from them. The apologist can

teach on solid biblical truths related to complicated topics, such as religious pluralism, the afterlife, prolife, and sexuality according to Scripture, and the apologist will be cheered on. *Give me the answers!* is the eager sentiment of this group. The apologist can, more or less, get straight to the truths without needing to guard their words too much as this group is already on their side.

2. Those who have some trust in the apologist but may not yet be fully convinced of biblical truths.



In any population—youth, young adult, or adult—there are those who the apologist has some relational equity with, or else they wouldn't be there. Most people in Group 2 are likely already Christians, but they lack maturity in areas. They may have been raised in a church, but are now being influenced by others to reject faith or take on progressive and false teachings about doctrines and ethics. The apologist's hope is that they will move inward, to Group 1.

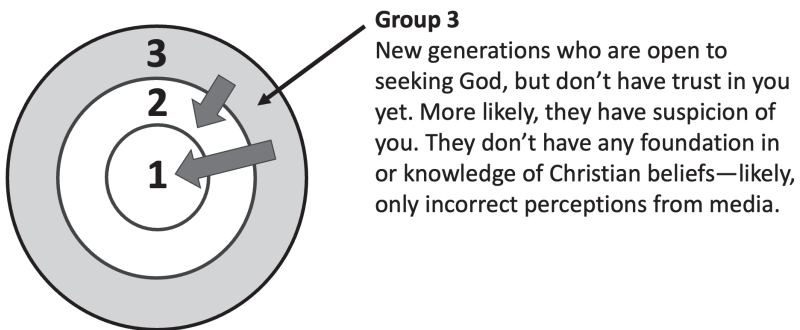
Common characteristics that can be present in Group 2 are:

- They likely are becoming influenced by “new teaching” regarding the Bible and Christianity on social media, which often undermines biblical views on topics such as sin. Taking on this new view, they can be a “Christian” and not have much of their life clash with culture or their peers.
- Definitions get blurry for them relating to topics such as the nature of the “gospel” or the identity of Jesus.
- Some have experienced disappointment in the church and may be moving toward abandoning their faith.

- They may be struggling with doubts and beliefs. Some are afraid to share the questions they have with those around them because they have heard the voices of their parents or church leaders who have expressed strong negative tones and reactions regarding those who believe differently.

A great way to learn from Group 2 is to survey them and ask what questions they have. This shows them respect, and the apologist can find out if they are presenting apologetics that answer the questions this group really wants to hear about.

3. *Those who haven't yet developed trust in the apologist, and who don't know many of the doctrines and beliefs of Christianity.*



In many ways, Group 3 is who apologetics is ultimately for. There are a massive number of young people in this group. This group likely:

- is highly suspicious of Christians and church leaders today.
- is not familiar with most Christian terminology or beliefs, as they likely did not grow up in Christian homes. The apologist must define terms and be careful about assumptions regarding what this group already knows.

Tone really matters most with Group 3. Smugness or condescension are big repellants and discredit the messenger. Group 3 has been bombarded

with teaching that is often contrary to historical Christian beliefs, and many of them distrust conservative Christians. This group needs to know that the apologist wants to hear and respond to their questions.

The apologist does not need to hide any beliefs from this group. They can state historical biblical truths with confidence, and most importantly, with clarity. But clarity must have along with it great kindness, gentleness, love, patience, and empathy. The hope with this group is to move them inward to Group 2, where they are hearing more, gaining trust, and surrendering their lives to Christ. Then ultimately, moving them to Group 1, where they will build a solid Christian foundation in the truth.

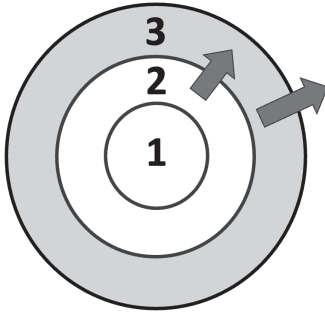
In the Bible, we see that Jesus' heart broke with compassion for those who did not know Him yet. Christ saw this group (Group 3) as lost sheep without a shepherd, and He wasn't passive toward them. He sent His followers to go to those who do not know Him (Matthew 9:36-38).



Once, I was at a church gathering where a sensitive topic was talked about during the announcements. It was stated strongly that the issue centered on deception, and there was a kind of “rally-the-troops” tone in the communication about it. There were even people who clapped. I saw a young woman leave the gathering, and I went outside as well, to find out why she had left. I figured it was because of what was said.

I came to find out that she would have fit into Group 2. She had drifted away and was coming back to give “church” a try. And unfortunately, it felt to her that this church was an “us-versus-them” place. I listened with intention and learned that it wasn't *what* was said, but *how* it was said. She headed out the door because of how the topic was spoken about.

This gathering was not a church-leader meeting with only committed, mature Christians. Instead, these things were said in the worship gathering, with drifters from faith and nonbelievers present. If we aren't considering these varying perspectives, we can unintentionally repel those in Groups 2 and 3 from hearing truth simply by the way in which we talk about issues. A new kind of apologist doesn't hold back truth but is strategic and winsome about how they present the truth to new generations.



We may have Group 1 cheerlead us on, but if we aren't thinking about how Groups 2 and 3 are hearing what we say, considering their current belief systems, and taking to heart how emotions and feelings work, we can see them repelled backwards—not by the truth itself, but how we communicate it.

Now, we have an amazing opportunity as new generations are open to truth.

Time to Pay Attention

It is not time whatsoever to hold back on speaking the truth. But it is time to pay attention to how we talk about it. As we conclude this chapter, let's consider something especially important. Our focus is on using apologetics to engage new generations, teens and college-aged people who are growing up in a very confusing world and being taught many false and deceptive things. Here is the key: We must have a broken heart as Jesus did—seeing them like lost sheep following false shepherds and teachings. Viewing them in this way transforms our tone and approach.

Our approach to using apologetics will be noticed by new generations. They will see our attitudes and postures, and how we speak about the people we disagree with. They will notice if we are combative or kind. If we truly care about those who don't know Jesus, we don't want to create a new generation of apologists who mainly use apologetics that lack an evangelistic focus. We want to see those who are caught in a world of false truths and sadness to learn about the goodness of God, His grace, and the joys of following Jesus in the way of truth.

I want to mention an important observation that this tone and way of speaking to and with those who aren't Christians is not only about in-person situations. It also matters how we interact online on social media. I see far, far too many Christians into apologetics who type responses to people that are horribly callous and feel uncaring. Please note that the point I am raising here also applies to the words that we type. You may see attacks on our faith and want to respond back (which I think we should), but *how* we are

responding online matters. Remember that we should expect critics to sometimes share harsh and mean words about Christians and our beliefs. Non-Christians do not have the Holy Spirit within them and are only thinking naturally through the lens of how the culture has shaped their worldview. I need to realize that if I wasn't a Christian, I would likely have the same questions about and criticisms of the faith. Don't hold back in sharing truth online, but what our fingers type matters.

Allow me to pose another question to you: *Looking at your online social media interactions and what you type, do you see biblical truth paired with kindness and patience, or do you see truth laced with attacks and callousness?* Are you listening to Jesus and His words on loving our enemies, and Peter's words about "gentleness and respect"? Be honest with yourself about what you see when you look back upon the words you type.

The Young Atheist Who Came Back for More

Let me share a positive story that began when I was in an online social media discussion with a young atheist who lived in a different city than I did. We had been communicating for about six months, and it so happened that I was speaking at an apologetics event taking place where he lived. So I told him about it and invited him to meet me there and attend the session I was teaching. I truly wasn't expecting him to go, but I got to the event as it had started (I was speaking later in the day) and he let me know he was already there. He told me that he was sitting in the seminar: "How to Understand the Mind of an Atheist." I got all flushed and was honestly worried, as I didn't want him to be pushed away from the faith in a seminar about atheists. I almost ran as I made my way to the seminar. I wanted to let the speaker know that an atheist I had invited was in the room. I got there too late to talk to the speaker, as the session had already begun. I sat down next to my new atheist friend and was very conscious of every word the speaker was saying.

In this case, the speaker—who didn't know there was an atheist in the room—taught about how to dialogue with atheists and did an amazingly excellent job. I felt a major sense of relief as the speaker consistently reiterated that he respects atheists and even understands why they believe what they do. Though the seminar clearly was about how to respond to atheist challenges

against Christianity, he never once stated negativity about an atheist person's value or intelligence. The speaker's approach was that of gentleness, kindness, and respect. He even defined words that a non-Christian, or someone who may be new to faith, may not already be aware of.

When it was over, my atheist friend was quite moved and told me he really learned a lot. Afterward, we ended up talking with the speaker and stayed for an hour with him. My atheist friend ended our talk by saying that he wanted to have more information about Christian beliefs. He had sat through a seminar about why his beliefs were wrong, yet how the speaker talked about atheists with compassion and respect caused this young man to want to learn more about Jesus. The speaker perfectly demonstrated being a new kind of apologist in our current culture.

In closing, of course the Holy Spirit is the One who changes people's hearts. He uses our apologetics to open doors to others with the truth. The most important practice any new, or old, kind of apologist needs to desperately do is to pray. We are partners in a battle against evil for souls and minds, but God is powerful, and He transforms new generations with the truth. We are living in a truly exciting time to be using apologetics.

Dan Kimball is the author of several books, including *How (Not) to Read the Bible: Making Sense of the Anti-women, Anti-science, Pro-violence, Pro-slavery and Other Crazy-Sounding Parts of Scripture*. He is also a vice president at Western Seminary and on the staff of Vintage Faith Church in Santa Cruz, California.