

Dealing With Both Minds and Hearts:
Answering the Questions Behind the Questions
By Rev. David Montoya

“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.” 1 Peter 3:15

Too often apologetics is defined solely in negative terms, as defending the faith *against* attacks or giving answers to people’s *objections* to Christianity. It is interesting to note that while 1 Peter 3:15 calls us to be ready to give an answer or a “defense,” it does not describe that defense in negative terms, as an answer to a person’s objections or as an attack on their non-Christian world view. It is not even framed in intellectual language. Rather, it tells us to have an answer ready to give to people who *ask* us about the *hope* that is within us. These people are primarily asking questions about our hope, not arguing with us about the ideas in our head. Does this mean that apologetics should be non-intellectual and altogether non-confrontational? To the contrary, Paul says that “we destroy arguments and every proud obstacle to the knowledge of God” (2 Corinthians 10:5). My point is simply that “giving an answer,” while it often includes dealing with intellectual objections, should not end there. The reason for this is simple. People are more heart creatures than head creatures. As Pascal famously observed, “the heart has reasons that reason will never know.” He insightfully argued that you first need to get a person to *want* to believe Christianity is true before actually making a reasoned case for it. In other words, a full-bodied apologetic must tend to the heart as well as the head. That, I believe, is why Peter draws our attention to the hope and not the knowledge within us. Hope appeals to the heart and its deepest longings, longings that can only be filled by God. For the seeker, the head is an avenue to the heart; for the scoffer, the head is a barrier to the heart. In both cases, the heart is the final prize that God seeks.

What is important for apologetics, then, is that we tend both to people’s hearts and minds. As we do this, we find that the people we are encountering hold within themselves more than just intellectual objections to Christianity. Often, it is our approach which brings out that aspect first. How many times have we drawn a battle line as if to say “we’re over here and you are over there and we have nothing in common until you see it our way.” Even when we do not come at it that way, the intellectual objections are often the easiest for them to articulate and so that is what we hear most and then we mistakenly conclude that those articulated concerns are their main concerns when often they are not. The result is that we pour all of our energies into answering those objections and ignore some of the underlying issues that really need to be addressed. In the most obvious scenario, a scoffer is throwing out intellectual difficulties as nothing more than a tactic to befuddle his Christian opponent. Yet even honest seekers often have questions behind their questions and heart concerns that lie deeper still.

Many of us wonder how it is that we are to fulfill Peter’s admonition to address people’s question about the hope that is within us, when it never seems that anyone is asking *that* question. Perhaps the fault lies with us, though. We fail to recognize that behind many, if not all, of the surface objections and questions lie deeper questions that pertain directly to the hope within us. If that is the case then we need to develop greater skill at getting behind people’s questions to address their real concerns. Proverbs 20:5 says, “The purpose in a man’s mind is like deep water, but a man of understanding will draw it out.” Good apologetics requires people of

understanding who have the patience and insight to not only deal with people's stated questions but to go below the surface and speak to their true objections.

How, practically, would one begin to go about this? What I have found effective is to analyze a person's objections or questions at the two levels of mind and heart and then to distill out two categories: common ground and points of tension/disagreement. The natural tendency is to stay with the mind alone and zero in only on points of disagreement. The idea is that if you can "just get them to see the error of their position" they will see the truth of God and be one step closer to receiving Christ. Unfortunately, this one dimensional approach often misfires on two counts: First, it focuses on areas of greatest distance and thus sets us up against the non-believer. They naturally take a defensive stance and our job is made harder. Second, it focuses only on intellectual issues which, while important, are seldom the only issues and often not the real issues. In short, this approach just creates an argument. But looking deeper than the stated objection helps one zero in on real issues, and finding common ground gives one a much *closer* starting point. How does this look in practice? When encountering people and their objections to Christianity, I try to answer for myself the following questions as I progress in my discussion with them:

1. What is their specific Intellectual Objection/Question? (Mind)
2. What are their Underlying Objections/Questions? (Heart)
3. What do these objections (and other things you know about the person) reveal about their values, beliefs, assumptions, fears, needs, hopes?
4. What in these values, beliefs, hopes, etc., *agrees* with God? (Common Ground)
5. What in these values, beliefs, hopes, etc., *disagrees* with God? (Points of Tension)
6. How will you answer their Heart Objections? What Good News do you have for their empty heart? How does Christ give hope in this area?
7. How will you answer their Intellectual Objections in a way that satisfies their mind?

Let's take an example which illustrates both how we often go wrong and how we can do better in representing Christ while defending the faith. One of the most common objections we hear today goes something like this: "I think Christians are arrogant for claiming that Jesus is the only way." Now let's walk through the steps:

1. What is their specific Intellectual Objection/Question? (Mind)

The specific intellectual objection is to Christian Exclusivism, the idea that Christ is the only way of salvation and that all other ways are false. Their counter claim is usually some form Religious Pluralism (a brand of Relativism) which says that all ways lead to God.

In this example the intellectual objection is not hard to isolate. In some cases it is more difficult, especially when ambiguous terminology is used. For example, if they had stated, "as long as you are a good person you will go to heaven," then you would have a hard time teasing out the actual objection. What is a "good person?" What do they even mean by "good?" What is heaven?

2. What are their Underlying Objections/Questions? (Heart)

The underlying objection is against arrogance. People do not object to Christian Exclusivism because it somehow offends their logic, they object because it seems to them to be the ultimate in arrogance. For you to claim that Jesus is the *only* way implies 1. That you know

all there is to know, 2. That you are intolerant of others and 3. That you consider your way (and therefore yourself) better than others. To people in this culture, that is morally repugnant.

3. What do these objections (and other things you know about the person) reveal about their values, beliefs, assumptions, fears, needs, and hopes?

They Value: Humility, Tolerance, Open-mindedness

They Believe: that all ways are equally valid; that Christianity may be good but not exclusively so.

They assume: that any kind of exclusive or absolute claim automatically makes one arrogant; that attitudes are tied to beliefs; that Christians (perhaps including you) are arrogant;

They Fear: that you will reject them or others because of their differing beliefs; that absolutism inevitably leads to hatred and harm to others;

They Need: To know that you don't reject them (or others) for holding differing beliefs; acceptance (love); Ironically, they also need absolute beliefs!

They Hope: For a world at peace where everyone accepts (loves) everyone else.

4. What in these values, beliefs, hopes, etc., agrees with God? (Common Ground)

The most obvious area of common ground is in the value placed on humility. Their distaste for arrogance and affinity for humility is as much a left-over from the Christian influence on Western culture as it is God's Law written in their hearts. But it is a significant area of common ground and should be recognized as such.

If they actually think Christianity has some good things recommending it, it would be good to find out what they *do* admire in it.

We have to admit that Christians are sometimes arrogant and that that is not right.

We have huge common ground over their desire to be loved and accepted and that others be loved and accepted. After all, that is the heart of the Christian message, that God "so loved the world..."

Now it is easy to see how so often we miss the mark when we fail to do steps 3 and 4. Our tendency is to do 1 and skip down to 5. Notice what happens. We recognize only where they are wrong and what needs to be corrected and then we go about correcting them. By only answering their head on this question, we only confirm the suspicions of their heart, they we are arrogant know-it-alls who care only about being right and not about people. We reinforce the false assumption that exclusivism/absolutism equals close-mindedness, arrogance and a preoccupation with truth to the exclusion of love. It is not necessarily because we are close-minded, arrogant and unloving, but because we have, in a sense, answered the wrong question and inadvertently misled them.

5. What in these values, beliefs, hopes, etc., disagrees with God? (Points of Tension)

That all ways are equally valid; That love and truth (humility and absolutism) are mutually exclusive; That open-mindedness is an end in itself; That peace can exist in the absence of (absolute) Truth.

6. How will you answer their Heart Objections? What Good News do you have for their empty heart? How does Christ give hope in this area?

This is the important one. If you can do this, you will go a long way. Answering their heart involves several things. First it involves *how* you answer. It cannot be stressed too much how important it is that the messenger of the Gospel of God's love actually model that love. This is at the heart of answering "with gentleness and respect." We can talk about humility, love and acceptance all day, but if our attitudes and actions don't match our words, barring God's grace, we are doing more harm than good. Assuming that we are modeling it, we also need to be able to explain a few things. For example, how it is that their very hopes could be fulfilled in Christ or how it is that without Christ (or in many cases Christ's truth) their fears will be realized and their hopes thwarted.

In this example, one could argue that our only hope for lasting peace between people is if people believed in the *absolute truth that love is good*. One could seek to demonstrate that our only hope for true acceptance and peace depends on the acceptance of certain truths. One could and probably should, spend time pointing out that Jesus was also a big fan of humility! It would be important to try to persuade the person to accept the idea that it is possible to hold truth in humility, that a person could hold deep convictions, but hold them with humility (examples abound, including the non-believers own passion about the rightness of humility!). If all along you are modeling this very thing, then your arguments will be that much more persuasive. It would be most useful to surface the fact that beliefs in absolute, exclusive claims is essential and inescapable. Use examples of non-controversial truths (such as "racism is wrong"). If they come to accept that proposition, that there are some essential truths that people just need to accept or we're in trouble (like the favorite, as long as you don't hurt anyone"), then you are one step away from arguing that Jesus is one of those kinds of truths, a truth that is ignored to one's peril.

7. How will you answer their Intellectual Objections in a way that satisfies their mind?

It has not been my purpose in this article to lay out the apologetic response to people's intellectual objections (there are many fine books that do that well). So, I will not lay out the response to this particular question either. What I do want to stress, though, is that you do need to have an answer, but the answer to the intellectual question must be nested inside the answer to the heart question. The heart question is the real issue. If you can respond appropriately to the heart question, they will be open to the intellectual response to their stated (mind) question.

If enough time is spent addressing the heart concern, then often the stated question changes or can be approached from a different angle. If, in this example, you did alleviate their heart's concern that saying, "Jesus is the only way," necessitates arrogance and bigotry, they may be left simply with the curiosity as to why you consider Jesus to be an essential truth (even THE Essential Truth), rather than just a private and subjective one. They may wonder why you think it essential to believe in Jesus as you think it essential to believe that killing is wrong. They are accustomed to grouping religious beliefs into private, subjective categories along with ice cream preferences. Your claim is only that religious beliefs belong in the category of the Essentials. You just better be able, at that point, to explain why. And it is at that point that you are explaining the hope that is within you - how it is that Jesus really is the answer to our essential questions and heart longings for love, acceptance, peace and even some truth to plant one's feet in.