

# THE 2024 ACNA ANNUAL THEOLOGICAL ESSAY CONTEST

First Place Winner

Laity

**Curious, Resourceful, and Kind:**  
**A Seasoning Blend for Gracious Apologetics**

Elizabeth Demmon

*Walk in wisdom toward outsiders, making the best use of the time. Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person.*

Colossians 4:6

## Introduction

My family recently began homeschooling our middle-school-aged children. This wonderful and rewarding undertaking quickly revealed how difficult it can be to convey meaning, even about a well-understood topic. Conjugating French verbs? I understand how to do that. How to teach it, however, is a fresh new challenge. Together, we discovered the more creative and engaging the explanation, the deeper and more satisfying the lightbulb moment of comprehension.

That same experience, that grasping for the best way to communicate truth, is the hallmark of effective apologetics. To many, the subject of apologetics might seem dry, consisting of stiffly logical arguments which lack emotional or personal appeal. To others, apologetics calls to mind provocative debates and needless

contention. Still others may see it as a purely academic endeavor, best left to the trained specialists. But Christian apologetics is much more expansive and exciting than that. It can be rich, challenging, and even fun. According to Alister McGrath, a leading apologist and author of a number of books on the topic, “[a]pologetics celebrates and proclaims the intellectual solidity, the imaginative richness, and the spiritual depth of the gospel in ways that can connect with our culture.”<sup>1</sup>

Today, access to virtually any information or opinion is instantaneous to whoever has an internet-connected device. Even so, biblical literacy and familiarity with Christian doctrine in secular culture is in rapid decline. This creates a remarkable opportunity to reach new audiences with the truth of the gospel in fresh ways. But in order to do so effectively, apologists must develop certain qualities that will set them apart from the content-creating frenzy and divisive echo-chambers of other voices. With Paul’s instruction to the Colossians as a guide, today’s apologists must commit to being curious, resourceful, and kind.

### **Be curious.**

*Walk in wisdom toward outsiders...*

First, apologists must develop a genuine curiosity about their audience. The Most Reverend Steve Wood, the new Archbishop of the Anglican Church in North America, recently displayed this quality in a straightforward and winsome way. Upon his election to the position of Archbishop, he spoke to the Provincial Assembly. “I really, really like non-Christians,” he said in an introductory interview. “I spend a lot of time with non-Christians. I go out of my way to make

---

<sup>1</sup> Alister McGrath, *Mere Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2012), 12.

friends with non-Christians. Genuine friends; not as a project.”<sup>2</sup> Archbishop-elect Wood went on to explain that he likes to hear what people think and why. This is the first mark of an effective apologist: to be curious about the things people believe and why—especially if you don’t agree with them.

People ask different questions today than in the past. If the church only answers questions that no one’s asking anymore, no matter how convincing the approach has been, it will be to no effect. What is on the hearts and minds of people *now* should shape apologetics. Effective apologists must care enough about the people they’re engaging with to find out what will resonate with them; what values, objections, difficulties, and authority influence them. This is not to tailor the truth itself to different audiences, but rather to tailor its delivery.

The first generation of the church found creative and relevant ways to preach the gospel to its widely different contexts. In the book of Acts, Peter appealed to Hebrew scripture when speaking in Jerusalem. Paul quoted the Athenian poet Aratus as he addressed the Areopagus, and appealed to rules of legal defense when brought before Roman officials—all in service to the gospel.<sup>3</sup> They were able to do this because they were familiar with the values of those populations.

CS Lewis was perhaps the greatest apologist of the 20<sup>th</sup> century precisely because of how well he knew his intended audience. In a speech about apologetics, he told his listeners, “Our business is to present that which is timeless (the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow) in the particular language of our own age.”<sup>4</sup> To demonstrate his point, he included a list of terms that might be lost in translation

---

<sup>2</sup> Archbishop Steve Wood, “A Conversation with Archbishop-Elect Steve Wood and His Wife Jacqueline,” ACNA Provincial Assembly, Latrobe: 28 June 2024. Recording found here: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lIeqDbJBo\\_8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lIeqDbJBo_8)

<sup>3</sup> McGrath, *Mere Apologetics*, 66-67.

<sup>4</sup> CS Lewis, “Christian Apologetics,” *God in the Dock* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans: 2014), 91.

between the priests he was addressing and the population they served. Lewis found, for example, that the “uneducated Englishman” used the term “Christian” to describe “a decent chap who is unselfish,” (but assumed no specific belief system).<sup>5</sup> Some other terms he explored were *morality*, *spiritual*, *creative*, *personal*, and *sacrifice*.

Think about your family, co-workers, neighbors, or kid’s peer group. How might they define *joy*, *pride*, *love*, *sin*, *lived experience*, *community*, *justice*, *nature*, *religion*, *authentic*, *identity*, and *truth*? How would they describe a “Christian”? If you don’t know, follow the example of Archbishop Wood: ask your non-Christian friends. This curiosity will lead to an apologetic approach that will click with your hearers.

### **Be resourceful.**

*...making the best use of the time.*

It is difficult to craft a compelling argument without a solid understanding of the reasoning behind it. But the good news for today’s apologist is that there is a wealth of resources and tools available for building this knowledge. McGrath writes that “[a]pologetics is not about inventing the rationality, imaginative power, or moral depths of the Christian faith. It is about pointing them out, and allowing people to see them clearly and appreciate them for what they are.”<sup>6</sup> In order to do this well, we must have a good idea of where to point.

Begin with the resources in your own story. Explore and develop the intellectual side of your faith. We are called, after all, to love God with all our minds.<sup>7</sup> Study the Bible, read through the Anglican catechism, explore the writings

---

<sup>5</sup> Lewis, *God in the Dock*, 95.

<sup>6</sup> McGrath, *Mere Apologetics*, 47.

<sup>7</sup> Mark 12:30

of the Church Fathers and English Reformers, get to know the entire *Book of Common Prayer*. The Anglican tradition recognizes the intellectual depth of the Christian story by building it into our liturgy. Our ancient and recent resources alike are beneficial for both personal growth and the foundation of apologetics.

An apologist must next learn from other apologists. The Christian message is intellectually robust and imaginatively expansive. Christ himself is the *Logos* of God through whom all things were made. The very cosmos echo with the design and delight of their Creator. This gives apologists any number of starting points to develop a compelling argument for the existence of God: the origin of the universe, the fact of human consciousness, the beauty of a musical masterpiece. Someone new to apologetics will do well to make use of resources that others have already developed. Peter Kreeft, professor of philosophy at Boston College, prolific writer, and apologist himself, has compiled a large selection of these very resources on his website.<sup>8</sup> Anyone can take the time to read through them and have an excellent introduction to the historical arguments apologists have used over the centuries. To become an effective apologist, read, learn, and test out the arguments for yourself. Do you find them compelling? Why or why not?

There exists yet another important resource for developing effective apologetics: your own, unique context. Find the reflections of the gospel in your own trade, vocation, community, surroundings, or interests. In making those surprising and fresh connections, your audience may hear the gospel in a new way. Alister McGrath, for example, is a trained scientist, and is therefore specially equipped to address scientific questions. CS Lewis was a literary scholar and critic, well-versed in classic literature, and made use of this knowledge of story and myth in his apologetics—in addition to using his gift as a writer to bring apology into his

---

<sup>8</sup> See [https://www.peterkreeft.com/topics-more/20\\_arguments-gods-existence.htm](https://www.peterkreeft.com/topics-more/20_arguments-gods-existence.htm)

nonfiction and fiction alike. The apostles Peter and Andrew were fishermen, and Jesus called them to fish for people. The resources found in your unique environment and community may lead to new insights. As Christopher Watkin says, “Tell the old, old story; preach the one true gospel. But tell it with a shift in perspective; preach it with an unsettling freshness. Don’t let people go away thinking they’ve heard it all before.”<sup>9</sup>

In his first letter, Peter calls his readers to “always [be] prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you.”<sup>10</sup> Remember that Peter’s exhortation doesn’t mean one person has to supply an answer to every question, unwaveringly. It means to be resourceful and examine what you believe and why, so that your answers can be thoughtful and edifying.

### **Be kind.**

*Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt...*

For some, the idea of looking for an argument is very uncomfortable. And for good reason: scripturally, we are warned against breeding quarrels and controversies.<sup>11</sup> In *The Book of Homilies*, one of the formularies laying the foundation for Anglican doctrine, an entire homily warns against the “unprofitableness and shameful dishonesty of contention, strife, and argument.”<sup>12</sup> Indeed, beyond the wisdom of our own faith, all it takes is a mere few minutes spent with incendiary social media comments or podcasts to feel the visceral and spiritual hazards of contentious speech. Why add to that?

---

<sup>9</sup> Christopher Watkins, “4 Principles for Practicing Apologetics,” *The Keller Center* (September 2023): <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/practicing-apologetics/>

<sup>10</sup> 1 Peter 3:15

<sup>11</sup> 2 Timothy 2:23

<sup>12</sup> Lee Gatiss, ed., *The First Book of Homilies: The Church of England’s Official Sermons in Modern English*. (London: Lost Coin Books, 2021), 177.

Fair warning, then, to those who might find the field of apologetics compelling for combative reasons. They must fight the temptation to “argue about certain questions, not so as to build people up in the truth but for vain glory, and showing off their cunning.”<sup>13</sup> Petty arguments are not the object of apologetics and don’t serve to advance the gospel. The point of apologetics is not to beat or humiliate an opponent, nor is it even to win an argument, but “to help open their eyes to the reality, reliability, and relevance of the Christian faith.”<sup>14</sup>

Furthermore, Christians today have the opportunity to demonstrate that it is possible to disagree and still treat someone with civility, respect, and love—as bearers of the image of God. Imagine that! Our society is so divided that people are commonly afraid to bring up deeply held beliefs with friends, family, or acquaintances because it might shatter their relationships. We’ve forgotten how to allow room for disagreement. This is not to say that the gospel must be content to sit on a shelf alongside other ideas. No, it contains the miraculous truth of God’s self-revelation. It demands bold proclamation. But if that proclamation is to be in service to the saving grace of Jesus Christ, this cultural moment requires a commitment to kindness.

This is neither saccharine nor naive. It is an active and intentional choice to reflect the nature of Christ to a hurting world. There is a time for piercing words and harsh convictions, but in the gospels Jesus nearly always reserved such confrontation to admonish religious leaders, not outsiders. To make headway against the prevailing winds of discord, today’s Christian apologists must not employ tactics of anger or provocation. For the sake of the gospel, be kind.

---

<sup>13</sup> Gatiss, *Homilies*, 177.

<sup>14</sup> McGrath, *Mere Apologetics*, 16.

So those who are averse to debate and controversy can rest assured that the field of apologetics, when pursued with goodwill, is both valid and valuable. But for those who are energized by a vigorous discussion, (and the one with whom you debate is also so disposed) there can be great joy in the argument. Not for its own sake; the end of apologetics must always be centered on the gospel. But it is okay have fun. Many arenas in our world today have forgotten that goodwill and friendship can and should exist between parties with opposing views, even—and especially—when the hope is to ultimately win them over to the side of truth.

Consider the example of our Lord. Jesus himself was—*sometimes*—willing to engage in debate. Where his opponents were intent on tricking him, he discerned their intentions and either redirected or eluded them. But when the conversation was earnest, he engaged. In my favorite example of this, Jesus welcomed the questions of the Samaritan woman at the well. He met her on her own terms, refuted her error, and won over a soul who became a witness to her whole community.

### **Conclusion**

*...so that you may know how you ought to answer each person.*

Like we've discovered in our homeschool room, the challenge of making something clear to another requires a fluency of understanding, refining, and even relearning if necessary. It requires creativity, intentionality, and constant attention to the audience. But first, it requires the circumstance. We wouldn't be explaining how to conjugate verbs at all if we hadn't decided to teach our kids French. Apologetics will not happen by accident. It requires intention and effort.

If no one has ever explicitly asked you why you believe that Christianity is the ultimate truth, consider this your intentional circumstance: I am asking you



now. What are the logical foundations for your faith? Take the time to think about it, wrestle with it, understand and refine your thoughts, so that you may be prepared to make a defense. Be curious about the non-Christians in your life and find out what they believe to be true. Then be resourceful: make use of the great lineage of faith and apologists to have gone before and learn from them, applying their examples to your life. And, finally, be kind, demonstrating both the love and the *Logos* of God. You will thus be an equipped apologist.

Jesus taught that the two greatest commandments are to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself.<sup>15</sup> Love your neighbor by recognizing their own faculty for thought is as rich, nuanced, lovely, broken, imaginative, and reasonable as your own. Meet them in as many ways as you can with your apologetics, and pray for God to turn their hearts to him in response.

---

<sup>15</sup> Mark 12:29-31