

I'm Not Buying It!

Examining Why Some Arguments For Our Faith Are More Persuasive Than Others

I love barbeque ribs. They are, without a doubt, my favorite food. Why? For a whole host of reasons. I love the way they taste, I love the way they smell, I love the way they look. I love the process of making them and I love the look on other people's faces when they admit that my special way of doing them is the best they have ever tasted!

But a while back, I made ribs for my family and some friends and, to my horror, one of those friends (you know who you are!) didn't like my ribs! I could not believe it! Who could possibly not like ribs, especially when I am the one making them?

When we approach the issue of sharing our faith or beliefs with other people through arguments and debate, we often do so by sharing those arguments that are most convincing to us personally. Granted, it is only the Spirit of God who gives life to dead sinners, but God does use the sharing of His Word to do so! Further, we are commanded, in passages like 1 Peter 3:15, to, "give a defense of the hope that is in" us. Perhaps the Lord used the godly life of a parent or friends to bring you to Himself. Perhaps it was a time of crisis that gave you the push you need. Or, for those of us more inclined to strict arguments, perhaps it was the cosmological argument that won the day, revealing that the universe itself cannot, because it began to exist, explain its own existence, therefore an explanation outside of the matter of the universe is needed. Even still, perhaps it was that the facts surrounding the resurrection of Jesus or the reliability of the Bible are so well attested to by history that convinced you to give your life to Christ. Whatever method used for you is most likely your "go to" approach when it comes to sharing your faith with others.

Yet, there are few experiences as frustrating in the Christian life as when we share our faith with a loved one and the argument that we see as so convincing bounces off of them like a ricocheting bullet. At times like those, we are forced to ask, why? Why does this argument, this evidence, this testimony not effect this person like it did you or I? The most basic question is: why are some arguments for the Christian faith more convincing than others, depending on the person? In more scholarly circles, this is referred to as the psychology of belief or the psychology of religion. The fact is that an argument can be sound, logical, and objectively true, and still

remain unconvincing to the hearer. Thus, when it comes to being effective witnesses for Christ, we need to understand why a person may be more prone to accept one particular line of reasoning while rejecting another. In this article, I will suggest several reasons why a particular defense of the faith might not be subjectively convincing to a person and I will also suggest how Christians can better evaluate how to best present convincing arguments to people.

1. Misunderstanding

Sometimes, though we may believe that we have presented facts in a very clear, precise manner, the person to whom we are talking may not understand the point being made. It must be remembered that questions concerning God, salvation, ethics, and the like can sometimes be incredibly complex and need to be thought through very carefully.

2. The Passing Of Time

A pastor friend of mine once told me that a good idea is almost never accepted the first time it is presented. But if it is truly a good idea, it will surface again. People should not be expected to be fully convinced about an argument or testimony the first time it is heard. Even Anthony Flew, one of the most famous atheist philosophers of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries who, a few years before he died confessed that he now considered himself a theist (not a Christian mind you, but a believer in a God), was not convinced by any argument immediately. Yet he confessed that it was the teleological argument, that the universe is designed for a purpose that eventually won him over.

In most cases, a person needs time to consider the arguments, for them to marinate in the mind for days, weeks, months, maybe even years, before being convinced. If God is so patient as to wait for millennia for us, surely we can be patient for them!

3. Personal History

I am becoming increasingly convinced that behind every atheist is a God who didn't when they thought He should have. When we are let down by one in whom we have placed trust, it is very difficult to trust that person again. When someone prays for months, even years, for God to act and He doesn't act, at least not in the way desired, it can be very easy to be disappointed and even to despair in God's goodness, power, and even existence. The person to whom we are talking may be hurting from a time he or she believes God let them down.

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Further, the particular belief held, or the argument presented may have sentimental significance for the person. It could be the belief the person was brought up believing or a particular argument may stick because it was what a loved one had told them years ago.

4. Different Wiring

I am amazed (and a little jealous) at people who can do art well. I cannot even paint the deck well, never mind attempting to paint a masterpiece on a canvas. God has put humans together differently; no two people are exactly alike! This, of course, is a good thing. God appreciates the diversity with which He has created His people. Thus, Psalm 139:14 declares that we are “fearfully and wonderfully made!” Some people are more reflective; some are more aggressive. Some people are more outgoing; some are more reserved. Some people are thrilled with farming; others live for the excitement of the business world.

This being the case, people think differently about arguments for God as well. Some people, more inclined to logical arguments, will be more swayed by philosophy and science. Others, more emotional by nature, will be convinced by the public testimony of godly people and the change in life the Gospel can make.

5. Personal Bias.

The people with whom we speak are not neutral, despite their loud protests to the contrary! They are biased towards their own position. This can be for several reasons.

a. They Are Biased As Sinners

The fact of the matter is: the Gospel is offensive. It means that I am not god, that I have sinned against the true and living God, and that I deserve hell. As a sinner, I like a message that says I am good and the things I love are good. But the Gospel teaches that my only hope to be right with God is to be forgiven through the death and resurrection of Jesus. Sin thrives on pride but the Gospel kills it. This is just what the Bible declares in Romans 3:11 by stating, “THERE IS NO ONE WHO UNDERSTANDS; THERE IS NO ONE WHO SEEKS FOR GOD.”

b. They Are Biased As Worldview Holders

We all have various belief commitments; ways of looking at the world that inform our view of evidence. When a person is committed to a naturalistic way of looking at the evidence, it will be very difficult to persuade them that a supernatural cause may be reasonable. Or, as another example, a person who is committed to a pluralistic way of

looking at the world will be very slow to agree with any doctrine he or she perceives to be “intolerant.”

c. They Are Biased As People With Vested Interest.

A person may have personal stake in what is believed or not believed. When one has vested interest in a particular belief, he or she can have very powerful incentive to assume an alternate position could not be true. For instance, if a pastor were to come across evidence that Jesus did not rise from the dead or that evolutionary theory must be true, he is very likely to not be convinced by such an argument because his salary is dependent upon his belief. Everyone we meet has these types of vested interests. For instance, a Muslim may be shunned or even imprisoned or killed for believing the message, a person with a family member who lives in a same-sex relationship may feel they will betray their loved one, or a business owner may feel that he or she will have to discontinue certain corrupt practices. This was the struggle of the rich young ruler in Matthew 19:16-22 who did not trust Jesus because he knew it would cost him. The person to whom we witness is an idol lover and will not let go of that idol easily.

6. The Allowance Of God

This point is probably the most difficult pill to swallow. We like to believe that salvation is all up to us. But the Bible repeatedly claims that it is God who grants repentance. Romans 9:8-29, Ephesians 1:4-5 and 2:1-9, and 2 Timothy 2:25 all teach that it is God who saves and gives repentance as He sees fit. This does make sense, however. After all, if we, as sinners, will not choose God, how are we to be saved? The Bible demonstrates that there are times in which God does not allow His truth to permeate hearts. Various reasons are given for this, but the bottom line is: if God is the giver of the gift, it is His right to determine who gets it and when they get it. The person with whom we witness may be at a place where God is saying “Not yet.” This does not mean that we give up, because God commands us to witness and because God uses the preaching of His word to save people. But it does mean that we lean on His timing.

Given these obstacles to faith, how then should Christians witness to such a variety of people?

1. Be An Example Of Godliness

In 1 Peter 3:15, the premier verse on being a witness for Christ, Peter begins his statement by telling us to, “sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts.” Peter understood that arguments, as good as they may be, can be defeated by a hypocritical lifestyle. A Christian who talks of Christ but doesn’t live Christ is like a door to door salesman who doesn’t use his

own product! If he doesn't use it, why would the customer?

2. Pray

The Apostle Paul constantly reminds his readers to pray for those to whom we speak. In Ephesians 1:18, he writes, "I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened." If we truly believe that it is God who saves through our message, we will witness with a constant connection to Him through prayer.

3. Listen

In the work of apologetics and defending our faith, the words of James are important reminders. He writes, in James 1:19, that we are to be "Quick to listen, slow to speak." As we listen to people, we will hear their stories and we will learn what makes them tick. We will hear where they have been hurt in the past and where they believe God has let them down. Christians must learn to ask good questions; questions that are not simply "yes" or "no," but rather are intended to draw out the beliefs of others. Christians must ask "What" questions, "Why" questions, and "How" questions. One such question that I have begun to ask in order to help sift through the excuses people give not to believe is this: do you want Christianity to be true? If not, why not? This helps reveal the heart reasons behind a rejection of faith.

4. See The Issue Through The Other Person's Perspective.

We must ask ourselves questions as well. For instance, we might ask ourselves, "What might this person lose if they followed Jesus Christ?" Or, perhaps we might ask, "What beliefs does this person hold that are stopping him or her from accepting my statements?" It is also helpful to ask, "Where have I been unclear in my presentation?"

5. Develop Humility

A subtle temptation develops in many Christians who regularly share their faith with others that leads to the belief that, because another person is not convinced by a line of reasoning, that person must not be as mature as the one witnessing. Yet, because of the truth that God is the Savior, we must remember that our "getting it" is purely the grace of God at work in our lives, not the indicator of our I.Q. or maturity.

6. Learn A Multitude Of Strategies and Arguments.

There is, of course, biblical precedent for this. In 1 Thessalonians 5:14, the Apostle Paul writes, "Admonish the unruly, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with everyone." Paul did not approach everyone the same way. Rather, he let

the needs of the individual determine how he would speak with them. I imagine that Paul much preferred theological debate, given the style of his letters. Yet, when speaking to a child, a blue collar worker, a fisherman, a widowed woman, he adjusted his method to fit the moment.

There is a reason that a carpenter purchases a wide variety of tools: because different jobs have different needs. It has often been said, "When you only have a hammer, everything looks like a nail!" But if we are going to be serious and effective witnesses for Jesus, as ambassadors for Christ, we need to be willing to develop different tools for sharing our faith. Learn some of the more technical arguments for the faith, such as the transcendental argument (without God, transcendent laws like logic, morality, or uniformity have no rational basis), the cosmological argument (all things with a beginning have the reason for their existence outside of themselves) or the teleological argument (the apparent design in the universe must be actual design because natural processes alone cannot fully account for it), but also learn to share your testimony, live a life consistent with the Gospel you believe, and learn to present the Gospel itself in a clear and concise way. I present the Gospel as helping people understand that they need to:

Admit they have sinned against a holy, infinitely good, and powerful God and deserve infinite punishment.

Trust that Jesus paid for their penalty in full on the cross and rose again three days later.

Ask God to forgive their sins, secure their salvation, and empower them to follow Jesus faithfully.

It cannot be stated too many times that success in evangelism and apologetics is not measured in conversions, but in faithfulness. Despite being an Apostle to whom Jesus had appeared personally, Paul did not win everyone. It could be stated that far more people rejected Paul's message than accepted it. Yet, God was pleased with Paul. But at the same time, God does want to use us to reach people. Thinking through what reasons a person might reject the Gospel and practicing these ideas for dealing with those objections can be a helpful way of making you a more effective ambassador of Jesus.