

## **Giving a Defense Without Being Defensive** **Pastor Morgan Murray** **West Valley Presbyterian Church**

1 Peter 3:13-17

13 Now who will harm you if you are eager to do what is good? 14 But even if you do suffer for doing what is right, you are blessed. Do not fear what they fear, and do not be intimidated, 15 but in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord. Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you; 16 yet do it with gentleness and reverence. Keep your conscience clear, so that, when you are maligned, those who abuse you for your good conduct in Christ may be put to shame. 17 For it is better to suffer for doing good, if suffering should be God's will, than to suffer for doing evil.

Lately I've been seen this prompt on my social media feed, and it's been really helpful for me. The prompt says:

**Before you say it, ask:**

**Is it true?**

**Is it loving?**

**Is it helpful?**

This has provided a much-needed pause when I am composing a difficult email or in the middle of a hard conversation. I will write a thing, look at it, and say to myself: Yes, I believe that is true. But is it loving? Could I be saying that with greater kindness and compassion? Even if I can, will this be helpful to the other person or to our relationship? Or am just I saying it to get it off off my chest?

When the relationship stakes are high, two out of three won't cut it. If what I am about to say fails anyone part of this test, then I better not say it.

We can apply this to our Christian witness.

Peter begins this section with the rhetorical question, "You will harm you if you are eager to do what is good?" On its face, the implied answer seems to be, "Well, no one of course!" It never hurts to help, right? But Peter's first readers know better. They are trying to do good – indeed, to be the best kind of good they can be – by submitting to the leadership and Lordship of Jesus Christ. And yet others are indeed harming them.

Peter is concerned that, in the face of people being hostile toward them, Christians will be hostile right back. Even when explaining why they follow Jesus.

So Peter directs Christians to **Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and reverence.**

The word for making a defense of one's beliefs and actions is *apologia*, and yes—it is where we get the words “apology” and “apologetics.” C.S. Lewis' classic book *Mere Christianity* is an excellent example of Christian apologetics. The book was actually adapted from a series of radio talks broadcast by the BBC between 1941 and 1944. We can imagine that it must have been a time when of earnest soul searching and deep skepticism within a nation plunged into yet another World War. Was Christianity even credible? Lewis, a faculty member at Oxford, demonstrated equal measures of humility and brilliance as he presented what has come to be called Lewis' Trilemma. As we consider what Jesus of Nazareth said about himself, Lewis reasoned, only one of three possibilities can be true. He was the Son of God as he said he was, or he was deliberately lying, or he was delusional. Based on the description of Jesus' life and teachings, Lewis argues that – logically speaking – the first option is the most plausible one.

Like most Christians who want to be good and effective witnesses for Christ, I read *Mere Christianity* with a mix of admiration and humiliation. I could never explain my faith as persuasively as that! We hear a great apologist speak with eloquence and clarity and then convince ourselves that this kind of work is best left to the “professional Christians.”

It's at this point that I would invite you to reflect back on your own decision to follow Jesus and learn how to “sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts” as Peter puts it. Did you give your life to Christ because someone “proved Jesus” to you, or was because you felt the presence of Jesus in some strange but real way that you couldn't deny?

Did you *think* your way to Jesus, or *feel* your way to him?

I think most of us would say that **we follow Jesus because someone told us about him while while acting like him at the same time.**

Which is pretty much THE point Peter is trying to make this letter. He wants to remind his readers that they are the elect, chosen by God to showcase the Best Way to Live. He wants them to understand that, when it comes to this work, being in a one-down position is not a liability. That is exactly where Jesus placed himself. So don't be afraid, and don't be intimidated. But also don't be a belligerent jerk. Let your good conduct show Jesus as your words explain Jesus and the reason you have placed your hope in him.

**Peter to the Church: You can give a defense without getting defensive.**

Peter understood that belligerence was a really bad look for Christians in the first century.

But I gotta say, it's an even worse look for us in the twenty-first.

I'd live to give you some context for what I'm trying to say here, and then give you an example that I think we can all relate to.

First, the context: This week I had the privilege of welcoming a pastor into our denomination. Our Presbytery's Ministry Partnership Team asked him why he wanted to join ECO. He said that he appreciates ECO's "warm-hearted Reformed evangelicalism." Of course we all loved that phrase, and asked him to say more. He reflected on how our confessional statements, like the Heidelberg Catechism, include beautifully warm-hearted and heart-warming statements like, "the chief end of humanity is to know God and enjoy God forever." He went on to say, however, when it comes to identifying as an evangelical he is almost ready to stop using the word altogether.

Some of us are so familiar with this term we don't give much thought to it. Others of us aren't even sure what it means. Originally the term was intended to identify a form of Christian faith that was Christ-centered, biblically based, and outward focused. That is, evangelicals wanted to set themselves apart as people whose faith led to a moral transformation (being born again). They were committed to learning and living Scripture in their day to day lives. They were zealous for the work of proclaiming the gospel so other people would have their lives changed too.

But these are really the things that evangelicals are known for today. Most people outside the tribe (and many people inside it associate evangelicalism with a narrow political agenda that is often expressed angrily... even violently. Instead of being "for" Christ, evangelicals are typically known for what they are against. Instead of being champions for social improvement as they once were, they are seen as a fearful force clinging to the status quo.

In other words, evangelicals of the recent past have resemble the dominant culture that *surrounded* Peter's churches than they resemble the vulnerable Christians *inside* of them.

I want to make three quick points here:

1. Unless we recognize that where we are in a different social position from Peter's first listeners, then we can't rightly understand what Peter is teaching.
2. Unless we acknowledge that we've been in the one-up position for a long time, we won't understand why our "defense" of Christianity sounds so offensive to others.
3. Just because this has been the way of things for a long time doesn't mean it has to stay that way. We can choose different, and for the sake of the gospel we must!

Now let me offer a simplistic but vivid example of what I'm talking about.

In the last few years there's a low-tech form of mass communication that has gotten more and more popular: The freeway overpass sign. Someone will attach a sign – or lots of them, to the fencing that runs along a road or pedestrian walkway going over the freeway. Some signs call for social change. Some declare loyalty to a politician or a party. Some are surrounded by flags or balloons to make sure they get noticed. Whatever the message, these signs always have to be super short and VERY unambiguous. They are usually three words or less. After all, they are meant to be seen by people traveling at 70 miles per hour.

As you might guess, the ones that stick with me are the religious ones.

When I see one with a faith-based message, I run it through my “is it true/loving/helpful?” test.

Driving home on the 880, I have gone under several signs saying JESUS OR HELL.

Every time I see one, I *literally* shake my head.

I’ve been an evangelical Christian since the age of 8. I KNOW there are lots of folks within my tribe who believe this sign passes true/loving/helpful test with flying colors. But at the risk of offending: They are wrong.

Let me be clear: I respect their motivations. If I believed that JESUS OR HELL is an accurate expression of biblical **truth**, then out of love for my neighbor I’d want them to know that this is how the universe works. I don’t believe that, but if I did then my **love** for God and neighbor would mean I’d want *everyone* to know Jesus and not want *anyone* to go to hell. And what could be more **helpful** than steering people clear of hell, right?

*But that’s not how the true/loving/helpful test works.*

The test isn’t based on my intention. It is based on how my words impact to others. No matter how good my intentions are, it’s my impact that counts.

So what do we honestly believe will be the impact on tens of thousands of motorists seeing JESUS OR HELL signs during their evening commute? It is hard for me to imagine they would feel the warmth of God’s love. I can’t see how they would be drawn to God’s light by reading this ultimatum.

If you wonder how a non-Christian might feel seeing this sign, you can try this little thought experiment: Imagine seeing a sign like that that said “Vishnu or Hell” or “Islam or Death.” How would you feel? Probably angry and indignant and, well... belligerent.

Because we have been in a position of power for so long, this kind of defending our faith is especially harmful. To someone from another culture it is a threat. To someone who is emotionally or psychologically vulnerable, it is not only shaming-- It is terrifying. It is not true, not loving, not helpful.

I’m using this overly obvious example because I want us to consider the possibility that much of what we call Christian witness today takes the form of micro-aggressions.

If we are going to change that, then the first thing we need to do is start noticing it. So this week, pay attention to how you see Christians expressing their faith on the news or in social media. **Keep track of the number of “gentle, humble” expressions as compared to the number of “defensive, aggressive” expressions you see.** Put these expressions to the test. Are we

Christians, on the whole, expressing ourselves in ways that are **true** to character of Christ, **loving** toward those who don't think like we do, and **helpful** to those who are struggling?

We can change our witness and change how we are seen in the world. We can be more concerned about "doing right" with gentleness and reverence than we are about "being right" in defensive ways. We can choose to be "for Jesus" and only Jesus instead of being against this thing, that behavior, or those people. We have a real shot at changing the world with our good and compassionate conduct.

But what if we get maligned for that? What if people mock us for being weak or soft? And what if the people who do this call themselves Christians?

Don't worry about it. Let God work out. If suffering comes for doing good, so be it. No amount of ease or comfort is worth more than a clear conscience.

**If you wanted express the most true, loving, and helpful thing you could to the world and you could only use three words, what would YOU say?**

Let us pray.