

DEFENDING THE GOSPEL



HOW TO RESPOND WHEN YOUR
FAITH IS CHALLENGED

Kel Richards

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FAITH IS CHALLENGED

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Defending the Gospel

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Dedicated to my
'How to Share Your Faith' study group
at St Paul's, Chatswood,
whose ideas and influence can be found
on every page.

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How to use this book

This book is designed to be a tool you can work with. Read it with a pen in your hand. Underline anything you find useful. Jot down your own notes in the margins. Think of ways you can adapt or develop my suggestions for your own situation.

The result will be an addition to your mental equipment: a ‘sharp tool’ to help you cut through to the gospel truth. As Proverbs 27:17 says: “As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another.”

For that reason, working with others can be useful.

If possible, encourage your prayer or Bible study group to work through this book with you over a few weeks. Take time to discuss the questions at the end of each chapter. Share your experiences of interactions with outsiders.

Role-playing different challenges and responses can be particularly powerful in making you a confident Christian.

Much of this book refers to using the *Two Ways to Live* gospel outline to improve your confidence in defending the gospel. This outline is reproduced for you in chapter 2.

Chapters 4 to 9 take you, one point per chapter, through the *Two Ways to Live* outline—so getting familiar with the

outline first is a good way to begin.

The other chapters in this book look at the volcanically changing culture around us, and at specific matters that have become 'hot-button issues' for today's Christians.

Finally, I would welcome your feedback and comments. You can reach me through the contact page on my website: ozwords.com.au.

Kel Richards

1. Defending, answering and giving reasons

Being challenged

It can be a very tense moment. It can involve looking down at your shoes and shuffling your feet. It can involve opening and shutting your mouth like a goldfish in a bowl.

It's that moment when a friend or relative or colleague asks a question or makes a comment about the Christian faith—and you realize that you haven't got the faintest idea what to say in response. You have no answer. You have no reasons or reasoning to offer.

Your mind has gone blank. Your mouth has gone dry.

I remember the first time it happened to me. I was a very young radio announcer, probably all of 19, at a country station. Standing in the record library of the local radio station in Armidale, in northern New South Wales, I heard the other young announcer beside me say, "Religion is just for people who need a crutch".

And he said it with all the wisdom and certainty of a 19-year-old (we were about the same age). He was most likely

repeating a remark he had heard somewhere. But I had never come across that sort of comment before. It floored me for a moment. And then I thought of how to reply.

“No it’s not!” was my intellectually and theologically powerful response.

And that was the end of the conversation.

I did badly because I hadn’t done my homework. I wasn’t prepared.

How would I deal with such a comment today?

I think I would have done better to ask a question: “What do you mean by a crutch?”

And whatever his reply was, I could then have followed up with more questions: “What evidence or argument has led you to this conclusion?”; “Is what you call ‘a crutch’ always a bad thing, or can it sometimes be a good thing?”; “What might count as a ‘good crutch’ as opposed to a ‘bad crutch?’” And so on. In fact, the further questions I asked would all have depended on his answers.

And that might have got a useful conversation going.¹

The real key in this sort of conversation is listening closely and carefully—and asking thoughtful questions to draw out what the objection is really all about. Quite often the person raising the objection has no really consistent idea at all—they are just throwing something out there to keep any serious consideration of the gospel safely at bay.

But at the age of 19, I completely blew it. I had no idea what I was supposed to be defending, or how, or why, or ... well, anything at all about my responsibility when an unbeliever raised a faith issue.

1 Gregory Koukl calls this approach ‘The Columbo Tactic’ and explains in useful and practical detail how to do this sort of questioning in his book *Tactics*.

Biblical guidelines

So that's where we need to begin in this book—answering those basic *who, what, when, why* and *how* questions. A good place to start looking for information on all of those things is in 1 Peter 3:15-16:

... but in your hearts honour Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defence to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect ...

The context for this statement about making “a defence” is as follows.

Peter is writing to a bunch of Christians scattered through several places in what is now Turkey. He is writing to them because they are either now experiencing persecution, or about to experience it. One of his main reasons for writing is to tell them how to cope with persecution. (1 Peter is a short letter, and it would be a good idea for you to sit down and read it right through now. It won't take long, and you'll see Peter's argument in context.)

Peter's advice, in the verses just before his statement about making a defence, is to be godly—then, at least, you'll be persecuted for the right reason, not the wrong reason:

Now who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is good? But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them, nor be troubled ... (1 Pet 3:13-14)

So Peter's statement about making a defence comes in this context of what he says about living a godly life. In other words, defending the gospel is just a regular part of ordinary

godliness (not that godliness is ever ordinary—but you catch my drift).

This applies to us

Your response might be “If ever I find myself facing persecution, I’ll bear that in mind”. It’s easy to assume that while there are places where Christians are being persecuted for the sake of Jesus Christ, it’s not happening in Western nations (such as Australia, Britain and the United States).

Don’t be so sure.

Persecution is not limited to physical torture. For instance, in the Gospel accounts of the crucifixion of Jesus, his terrible physical suffering is referred to, but is not described in detail or lingered over. What *is* described in detail is the shame, humiliation and mockery that Jesus had to suffer.

In the Gospels, shame, humiliation and mockery are spoken of as significant forms of persecution; and these were certainly components in the persecution being faced by the first readers of Peter’s letter: “If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you” (1 Pet 4:14).

So being insulted was one type of persecution that Peter’s readers were facing. And we face it too.

Christians in Western nations may (at the moment) not be facing imprisonment and torture for their beliefs. But they are certainly facing humiliation and mockery. Just think of the way the word ‘fundamentalist’ is used in the media these days, and you’ll see what I mean. There are plenty of comments on social media designed to humiliate, mock and insult Christians. In many homes and workplaces, Christians face

being insulted for the gospel of Jesus Christ.

That's quite enough persecution to be going on with—and that's quite enough reason to learn the lessons Peter is teaching and put them to work in our lives.

In that context, the statement in 1 Peter 3:15-16 is a *command*.

There are lots of commands in the Bible. Some are broad in their scope, and some are narrow. Some, for instance, apply only to husbands, or only to wives, or only to parents, or only to elders. Other commands are universal and apply to everyone.

Peter's command is universal.

This statement by Peter is a general command as broad in its application as "Love your neighbour as yourself". This command applies to all Christians. It applies to you. No-one is off the hook.

So who should be making this defence? *Every Christian*.

Start here ...

So, what is this a command to do? It's a command, first and foremost, to be prepared.

Sure, we are then commanded to use our preparation in a particular way—by making a defence. But step one in this command is "[be] prepared".

In other words, this is a command to do your homework.

Every Christian, without exception, is commanded in these words to do the preparation—do the homework—that will equip them to "make a defence".

Have you been doing your homework? If you haven't, you've been disobeying God.

Who are we meant to “make a defence” to? To “anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you”. You are commanded to have reasons ready to give to anyone who asks.

Listen for the challenge

There are two ways in which people can ask. They can use a question, or they can use a statement.

If someone poses the question “Why would the God who made the universe be interested in me—one person, on one small planet, in a vast universe?” they are asking you for a “reason for the hope that is in you”. But if someone makes the statement, perhaps even in a sneering, mocking tone, “The God who made the universe couldn’t possibly be interested in me—one person, on one small planet in a vast universe” they are asking you exactly the same thing. They, too, are asking for “a reason for the hope that is in you”.

We need to learn to hear the ‘asking’ that comes in statements, as well as the ‘asking’ that comes in questions.

But there’s little point in us being tuned in and hearing the challenges going on around us unless we have first done our homework and are prepared to give reasons and answers. This little book contains the sort of ‘homework’—the sort of preparation—we are to do.

Peter’s command also tells us *how* to give these reasons and answers. We are to answer “with gentleness and respect”.

The goal is not to win the argument, but to win the person. Making a defence is not playing an intellectual game. It’s trying to lower the barriers, and remove the obstacles, so that someone can see the good news of Jesus Christ clearly.

What we *must* defend

What is it we are meant to defend? It is “the hope that is in you”. This little phrase is a way of referring to the gospel. Right at the beginning of his letter Peter has written:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ!
According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be
born again to a living hope through the resurrection of
Jesus Christ from the dead ... (1 Pet 1:3)

That “living hope” is what Jesus Christ has won for us by his crucifixion and resurrection. It is the “living hope” of eternal life. It is “the hope that is in you”—a phrase that Peter employs to refer to the gospel.

So then, what we are meant to defend is *the gospel*.

The good news is that this means there’s lots of stuff we *don’t* have to defend.

We don’t have to defend the Spanish Inquisition or the Crusades. We don’t have to defend any denomination. We don’t have to be defensive about the pronouncements of the Pope, paedophile priests, embarrassing televangelists, or the wealth of the Vatican or of megachurches run like corporations.

We don’t have to defend the foreign policy of any so-called ‘Christian nation’. We don’t have to defend the behaviour of an abusive church-going parent or an insensitive Sunday School teacher. We don’t have to defend against the false assumptions people may have about Christianity. We don’t have to defend ‘religion’.

We choose the ground on which we stand and make a defence. Or, rather, the Bible has chosen the ground for us: we are to defend *the gospel*. We agree with (or leave to one side)

the irrelevant bits, and direct the attention of our challenger towards the gospel bits.

For instance: “Is the Vatican too rich, as you say? Should they sell all their art works and give the money to the poor? Maybe that’s not a bad idea, but I’m interested in your statement that God would not approve of their wealth. How do you think we can know what God approves of or disapproves of?”

That’s listening for the gospel issue in their words and picking up on it.

Why should we do this? Because doing this is part of “in your hearts honour[ing] Christ the Lord as holy” (1 Pet 3:15).

Doing this homework; being sensitive enough to hear when people are ‘asking’; then responding with reasons and answers and doing so with gentleness and respect—all this is part of honouring Christ. Failing to do that is failing to honour Christ.

And Paul agrees

Paul expresses much the same command in a slightly different way in Colossians 4:5-6 when he writes:

Walk in wisdom towards 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.

Once again he is recording a general command, applicable to all Christians, about how they are to behave towards unbelievers. As expressed by Paul, this instruction has several components:

1. Our “walk” is in view

We are to be wise in our behaviour (our “walk”) towards outsiders. We are to conduct ourselves like followers of Jesus Christ. We are to live Christianly. We are to live godly lives—lives that just might lead people around us to ask about the master we serve, and lives that will certainly help to recommend any answers we give.

2. Our time belongs to Jesus

We are to make the best use of time that we can. If we have a choice between discussing the weather (or the football, or last night’s TV) or picking up on the ‘asking’ someone has done with a question or statement, we are to do the latter. We are to choose to use the time well by answering them and defending the gospel.

3. Our speech is to be “gracious”

This is Peter’s notion of “gentleness and respect” expressed in another word. We are not to be smart alecs who have pat answers for everything, but people who are genuinely interested in unbelievers and who want to graciously help them see the gospel.

4. Our talk is to be “seasoned with salt”

This salt image appears elsewhere in Scripture—for instance, in the Sermon on the Mount, when Jesus says:

“You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people’s feet.” (Matt 5:13)

The point of this salt image seems to be that salt is unlike whatever it's added to. It is the difference between the salt and what it's added to that makes salt worthwhile. If salt loses its difference it becomes useless.

In other words, if our lives and our conversations become exactly like the lives and conversations of the unbelievers around us then we are useless. Our role, in whatever situation we find ourselves in, is to be different.

Being different may invite mockery, insults and humiliation—but that goes with the territory of following Jesus. We are to be different nonetheless, or else we become a waste of oxygen. Of course, we are not striving to be different, but to be godly and gracious; but in this age of conformism, bullies, mean girls and online trolls, that will look strangely different to many people.

5. We are to “know how ... to answer each person”

This is that familiar instruction to be prepared (or to do our homework), expressed in slightly different words.

So here's what we do

These two statements, from Peter and Paul, record a command from God that works out to be a series of steps:

- Do your homework (be prepared).
- As a result, know how to reason and answer.
- Live Christianly, so that if people around you have questions or comments about Christianity you'll be their 'go-to' person.
- Listen attentively for the various ways in which people 'ask' (with statements as well as questions).

- Respond to their challenge by asking, “What do you mean by that?” (or something along those lines) to draw them out, and listen to them respectfully.
- Ask follow-up questions so you are clear about where they’re coming from and what they’re really asking.
- Give your reasons and answers gently, graciously and respectfully.

If we do those things then we are obeying this universal command that God’s word imposes on all Christians (and we are honouring Jesus Christ as Lord).

There are two other things that need to be stressed if we are to be obedient to this command. The first is pray, pray, pray. The second is listen, listen, listen.

Praying and listening

Prayer is essential. We don’t do any gospel work on our own, even if we are the only Christian in our particular home, classroom or office. Jesus goes with us, and he even goes before us, speaking to the hearts and minds of unbelievers.

Jesus is the real evangelist.

We just tag along behind, answering the questions provoked by his work in hearts and minds.

You’re more likely to pick up on a subtle bit of ‘asking’ from a friend or colleague if you’ve been praying for that person. Nothing makes you more tuned in to a person’s interest than praying for them.

And we need to be praying for ourselves as well as others. We need to pray that the right bit of our preparation (our ‘homework’) pops into our head at the right time. And we need

to pray that we'll find the right words to explain our reasons and answers clearly.

Then we need to listen.

It is very easy to hear a question, or an objection, and want to leap right in because you are sure that you know the answer to that one. Don't. Much better to draw a deep breath and say, "What do you mean by that?" Let the person you are responding to explain. Then follow up with "What has led to you that view?"² It may be that what really troubles them is not quite what you had assumed it to be in the first minute.

As they go on speaking, you will start to understand what really troubles them and what you really need to be answering.

And, importantly, the assumptions they are making will start to become clear (about 'religion' or the purpose of life or the nature of the world—indeed their whole worldview will start to emerge). We can't helpfully respond to unspoken assumptions, so drawing out your friend's assumptions is vital.

Sometimes those assumptions will turn out to be self-contradictory, clearing the way to spell out the gospel.

Furthermore, we earn the right to speak by being willing to listen. If we will give them time, and listen patiently and sympathetically, they are more likely to listen to us when we offer reasons and answers. Of course, they may not. There are no guarantees. Just because you've earned the right to a hearing doesn't mean you'll always get one. But listening carefully, closely, and at some length is still the best step to take before reasoning and answering.

By praying, and listening, and going through those seven steps (above) that are part of obeying this command, we will be

2 These are questions suggested by Gregory Koukl in his book *Tactics* (and reading his whole book could be a useful part of your homework).

acknowledging our Lord and saviour, our ruler and rescuer, Jesus Christ, who said, “Everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven” (Matt 10:32).

The other side of that coin is that silence is denial. To fail to answer when we’re asked amounts to denying our Lord: “Whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven” (Matt 10:33). To respond to someone’s asking by giving a blank look that implies “Don’t ask me—I wouldn’t know, and, anyway, I don’t want to talk about it” is to deny Jesus.

The danger of doing nothing

In seeing that what we need to defend is the gospel, and not a lot of extraneous stuff, there is one more point to be made: the gospel is the logic of the universe. The gospel has a built-in persuasive power of its own. The gospel is coherent, consistent and logical.

The gospel has ‘explanatory power’—it makes sense of the world around us; it explains why the world is the way it is; it explains God’s purpose for us in the world; it explains who Jesus is, why he came, and what he requires of us.

The gospel is a whole worldview—a way of looking at the world and at how to live in the world.

Of course, there are plenty of unbelievers who will remain unbelievers even after the gospel has been explained and defended.

But the people God changes, he changes using the gospel: “I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes” (Rom 1:16), writes Paul. It

is the gospel itself that is “the power of God”, not the cleverness of our answers or reasons.

That takes a great weight off our shoulders. We don’t need to be persuasive: we just need to be clear. We need to give honest, biblical reasons and answers, and leave the rest to the power of the God—the gospel.

So the answer to the question “What are Christians to defend?” is “The gospel”. That means that step one in doing our preparation (our homework) is to learn an outline of the gospel.

Working from a gospel outline

There are a number of helpful gospel outlines, however this book is going to use the *Two Ways to Live* gospel outline (see chapter 2).

There are two reasons why I’ve chosen to use this gospel outline (rather than one of the others).

First, I’m writing this book, so I get to pick.

Second, *Two Ways to Live* is a comprehensive gospel outline that sets the gospel of Jesus Christ crucified and risen into the context of the biblical worldview. And that’s powerful in an age in which so many people don’t understand (or confidently *misunderstand*) the Bible’s worldview. Or in which people have assumed, or consciously adopted, a totally ungodly worldview that is now steering their lives.

If you prefer another gospel outline, I’m certain you’ll find that the material in this book can be fitted into whichever outline you prefer.

Two Ways to Live covers the gospel in six points. If you haven’t come across *Two Ways to Live* before, I hope you’ll

find it useful. It may be that as well as learning ways to reason and answer in defence of the gospel, you'll also learn a useful gospel outline.



Those, then, are the answers to the basic *who*, *what*, *why* and *how* questions. All that is left is the *when* question.

And the answer to the *when* question is *now* and *always*: *now* is the time to be doing your preparation (your homework); and you should *always* be ready to respond (to answer, defend and give reasons).

In summary

- Do your preparation.
- Know how to answer.
- Live Christianly.
- Listen carefully.
- Answer graciously.

Issues to think about and talk about in your group

1. Read 1 Peter 3:15-16. How are you currently responding to this command of Scripture?

2. What steps does this chapter recommend we take?
3. Read Colossians 4:2-6. In what situations do you have opportunities to answer graciously?
4. As a group, have a brainstorming session—a wide-ranging discussion—about possible negative reactions to Christianity, made either as comments or questions. Talk about as many different negative or dismissive approaches as you can think of.