

How Can We Successfully Engage People with the Gospel? The Role of the Affections

All humans have at least some interest in meaning. But it does not follow that every apologetic conversation should begin with a discussion of the logical or the rational. Rather, the apologist might be wise to center on some existential or affective interest of the hearer to prompt further conversation. This session looks at three New Testament passages that can serve as examples of someone appealing to an unbeliever's affective interest and opening an avenue to speak about meaning and truth.

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I. Introduction:

- a. Richard Weaver once wrote: “we do not undertake to reason about anything until we have been drawn to it by an affective interest.” C. S. Lewis tells us that imagination is the organ of meaning while the organ of truth is reason. Whereas most people are interested in “meaning” (do not confuse meaning with truth), the apologist might be wise to center on some existential interest of the hearer.
- b. Ever tell a person that there was an accident someplace? What their first response is, it is a response of meaning that grows out of the organ of meaning. Now you are able to give the particulars, the truth of the event.
- c. All apologetic work is context and person sensitive.
 - i. Use the context to begin the conversation that answers the question of meaning. The question of meaning is linked to a person's affections.
- b. There are certain core desires within all of humanity, although they are expressed differently. We call these sentiments or affections, which reveal what is important to us.
 - i. Humans have the why question which is connected to their affections.
- c. Work back from meaning to truth. If the question is not asked, then create a why question.

- d. The imagination is what is used to answer the why question. It paints a picture to give meaning.

II. Three examples of the apologetic use that appeals to the imagination for meaning

- a. John 4:7: A Christian act towards an unbeliever that excites their imagination.

- i. Give me a drink—

- 1. Why are you asking me of this? This sets the frame for conversation.

- ii. What is the meaning of this?

- 1. You are a Jew, and I am a Samaritan.

- iii. Work back to the Truth that caused the question in the first place.

- 1. Jesus is the living water

- b. Acts 17:23: Christian claim in light of a philosophical, social or religious context which gives rise to the claim.

- i. This I will proclaim to you: the unknown god

- 1. Why is the world as it is?

- ii. What is the meaning of this?

- 1. They listen because it is important to them—meaning is associated with what people think is important.

- iii. Work back to the truth behind the claim—The Resurrection

- 1. This is the unknown God who has made himself known

- c. I Peter 3: 14-15: Christian response to suffering before the unbeliever

- i. Why are you living this way? There is an interest because it runs counter to human affections/desires.

- ii. What is the meaning of this?

- iii. Work back to the truth behind the life—

III. Conclusion

- a. Many may feel a bit uneasy about this, as we think we should always respond with something of our belief, and sometimes that may be the right thing to do.
- b. However, often that does not work well, especially in the world where Christianity is considered implausible.
- c. Once the meaning question comes, then the apologist moves to explain the “meaning”, which leads to talking about the truth of the thing.
- d. Beginning an apologetic conversation in a way that appeals to the unbeliever’s affection (existential interest) might prompt the hearer to raise the question of “meaning”.