

# Reflections on the Place of Friendship in the Practice of Christian Apologetics

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This is a topic that I have been contemplating for many years. I think it is healthy for believers to stop from time to time to assess their lives and ministries in order to ascertain whether they fall within the parameters set in the New Testament. We must guard here against inflexibility, so that our minds are open to how the Holy Spirit might work differently in our lives.

## *A Question That Changed My Ministry*

Several years ago I was the speaker for the annual meeting of a well-known evangelical apologetics organization. During the question-and-answer period, one member of the group asked a question that has changed the way I interact with unbelievers. The question concerned my speaking engagements at secular universities and similar places. He wanted to know whether I, or other published apologists that I knew, were able to observe many people becoming Christians while we used apologetics in these contexts. I had heard the question before, so I proceeded to give one of my typical answers. I said something like, "Well, since I'm only there for one or two nights, I must turn any inquiring students over to a local Christian group, often one of the sponsoring or-

ganizations that was responsible for bringing me to campus. Of course, a day or two is not very much time to work with these seekers.”

I need to mention briefly that I took very seriously my handing of seekers over to Christian organizations before I left town. I generally inquired beforehand as to the procedure they would use, how they would follow-up with interested students, even long afterwards, and so on. I have often requested that they inform me later concerning the results. Among other things, I was most interested in whether or not any of these seekers became believers.

But in this particular instance the questioner continued with a well-placed follow-up. He asked how I could ever hope to reach unbelievers with such “one night stands.” Several of his colleagues quickly challenged his boldness. But by this time I had been among these folks for a couple of days and I’d gotten to know the questioner, so not only was I not offended by his pressing the issue, but I actually told him that it was an excellent follow-up. As I said, I heard the question on many other occasions and I still think my answer is the one that must be given. After all, what was the alternative? When invited to speak at a university, one can hardly move in for a semester or more!

Nonetheless, the question troubled me for a long time, actually for a few years! Of course I could not stay for an extended amount of time whenever I took such a speaking engagement. But the follow-up question caused me to wonder if the Lord could use me in additional ways that I had not yet considered to do more than present the data in favor of Christianity. Could I actually witness, on a regular basis, lives being forever transformed by the Holy Spirit’s use of apologetics with individuals? Was there something I could do to further the process of working with people, whether or not they ever came to the Lord? And could I also be helpful in the follow-up process, in order to make sure that young believers got a good start in the Lord?

From the beginning, one objection to my follow-up ideas was immediately perplexing. With a schedule that was already filled to the brim with up to 60-70 hours per week, teaching graduate school and writing for publication, as well as the speaking engagements themselves, how

was I to possibly carve out enough time to get involved regularly with individual lives? This was a serious enough matter that I could not even imagine a way out. Actually, it appeared rather daunting . What would I give up?

So I brought this entire matter before the Lord regularly in prayer, questioning whether I should make room in my life for another dimension of ministry. Humanly speaking, I did not care to add anything to my personal agenda, especially if something else had to be removed. So it seemed like it would have been better had the campus groups continued making the contacts and taking care of the follow-up. But on the other hand, the prospects of being a part of individuals coming to the Lord was simply exciting. So I continued praying.

### *Jesus' Ministry to Unbelievers*

My initial thought was that perhaps I should establish friendships with unbelievers who had come to me with questions or even to deal with their own religious doubts. I decided to see if I could find support in Scripture for this next step; could it just be a popular conviction of this generation but without support in the life of Jesus and others? After all, some would say that our only job in this matter is to preach or otherwise witness to unbelievers and come down heavily on their sin and lack of belief.

The first hint of support I saw in the Gospels was Jesus' general mindset and action regarding his enemies. He commanded his hearers to be merciful to those who opposed them, to love and pray for them, and to be willing to lend to them without ever expecting anything in return. Jesus even taught that we should bless our enemies when they curse us (Mt. 5:43-48; Lk. 6:27-36)!

Putting these commands into action, Jesus fed and healed many with all sorts of problems, including demon possession. Many unbelievers and even Gentiles were included in this number (such as Mk. 7:24-30; Lk. 7:1-10). Jesus continued to love and weep over them, even

after they rejected him (Mk. 10:21-22; Lk. 13:34-35; 19:41-42). And of course, Jesus prayed to his Father that those who tortured and crucified him would be forgiven (Lk. 23:34).

These texts may all sound very familiar to us, but I think we generally miss the radical nature of Jesus' commands here. The interaction to which he calls us sounds far from the sort of advice that we hear from time to time. Through his teachings and the life he lived, Jesus modeled this attitude toward those who opposed him, used him, tortured him, and finally killed him. It is no wonder that what we see here has solidified Jesus' reputation as a great wise man and ethical teacher. But going even beyond this, there is another aspect to his actions that is significant: he willingly died so that others could live (Mk. 10:45).

The next hint takes us to the very heart of our topic. Jesus fellowshiped regularly with unbelievers, such as sharing the dinner table with sinners, Pharisees, and even tax collectors, who had reputedly defrauded his people.<sup>1</sup> For these actions, he was often criticized. Jesus himself reported the "word on the streets": he was said to be a glutton, a drunkard, and a friend of sinners (Mt. 11:19; Lk. 7:34)!

In terms of contemporary research, the texts in the last paragraph are strongly attested for at least three major reasons, which explain their very wide acceptance among critical scholars today.<sup>2</sup> These texts are found in three of the four synoptic sources, including the "Q" material in Matthew and Luke, which is often accepted as the earliest and best Gospel source. Further, the well-recognized "principle of embarrassment" is definitely applicable here. Given the offensive and even shocking nature of these statements, such as Jesus being called a drunkard and glutton, these proclamations were reported at a cost to Jesus' reputation. Yet, they were recorded because they were true: Jesus did fellowship with such persons, and so the rumors spread. Lastly, the criticism was obviously made by those who opposed Jesus, thus we have an example of "enemy attestation," where even Jesus' critics conceded the point.

Thus, Jesus' behavior of spending fellowship time with the Pharisees as well as the "sinners" of society is a very special insight into his life and practice. And while the criticism obviously goes too far, it still

points out a crucial truth: Jesus must have exhibited the characteristics of friendship with unbelievers, as taught in the Gospels, because otherwise it is far too difficult to explain why *they* would want to be found in *his* presence. In other words, Jesus most likely would not have had repeated audiences with such persons, unless he had been at least somewhat friendly towards them and was concerned for their welfare. No doubt, he was also straightforward in his denunciation of their sin, but unless he also exhibited some of these personal, friendly characteristics, it is difficult to see why there was no shortage of folks who wanted to be in his presence.

We also have to be very careful not to miss another hint. Both crowds as well as individuals were numbered among Jesus' audiences, and they gathered around him in spite of his very strong words directed at least some of those he had befriended. For example, he was especially critical of the Pharisees, as in his series of lengthy "woes" pronounced against them (Lk. 11:37-54), including his declarations of judgment aimed at those who rejected him (Mt. 7:21-23; 11:20-24). True, he did miracles among them. But this alone would seem not to explain at least the private meals.

What does all of this tell us about Jesus? He loved unbelievers as well as believers, including (as the biblical text also indicates) those who tortured and finally killed him. He was more than willing to meet both the physical as well as the spiritual needs of those who sought him. And he taught his followers to do the same. In spite of his many strong pronouncements of judgment and correction, he was sought after by unbelievers and fraternized with them often enough that he was criticized by the rumor that he was a "partier." Even this derogatory label indicates his friendship with, or at the very least his availability to and presence among, those who would ultimately reject him.

### *From Jesus to the Early Church*

So what was it about Jesus that caused him to be in such high

demand? A wide variety of listeners regularly came to hear him preach and teach, some presumably traveling a distance to do so. Over and over again, we read some variation of the idea that the people were simply amazed at Jesus' teaching as well as his overall authority, and that he plainly exceeded that of the religious leaders of the day in teaching, preaching, and ministering.<sup>3</sup> His apostles and a number of female followers were utterly devoted to him, and many died later for this commitment.

Of course, Jesus' miracles drew many of these people. This topic is in itself an interesting juxtaposition of contrasts. For example, we are told that some believed Jesus' miracles, while apparently not wanting to follow him (Jn. 2:23-25). Jesus himself seemed to prefer that people believe him because of the truth of his teaching. But he also realized that some listeners needed to see the miracles, so he encouraged them in this regard (Jn. 14:11).

But what can we conclude about the groups of Pharisees, tax collectors, and those who were simply known as "sinners," who experienced another side of Jesus' ministry? Specifically, what about those dinners and other occasions where Jesus was presumably invited into their presence? What principle(s) did Jesus employ personally in order to distinguish those who were encouraged and befriended in this manner versus those who were openly criticized and judged?

In light of the fact that unbelievers exhibit all sorts of differences, one suggestion<sup>4</sup> is that Jesus differentiated between those "insiders" who were troublemakers and who would mislead his followers if given the opportunity and those who were "outsiders." While the latter were also mistaken, they were not in a position or context to mislead his followers and generally were not involved in trying to do so. The former were the ones who argued with Jesus publicly and received the bulk of Jesus' denunciations, refutations, and other strong treatments. This suggestion can also be extended to the early church, where apostles like Paul were much less critical of unbelievers who were outside the church than they were of false prophets and those who sought to mislead the church from the inside. The operative principle here might be the influence that the

persons exerted on the faithful. False teachers and “sowers of discord” were not to be tolerated in the church. Rather, they were to be exposed and separated from fellowship.

While I think that these suggestions exhibit some good insights, I prefer the complementary differentiation of “seekers” from those who were settled in their theological opposition to the teachings of Jesus or the early church. There are ample cases of sincere individuals who sought Jesus and received sympathetic attention from him, such as the rich young man (Mk. 10:17-31) and Nicodemus (Jn. 3:1ff.).<sup>5</sup> I would suggest that many of the individual Pharisees, tax collectors, and other “sinners” who had dinner with Jesus may also have been persons with this sort of mentality. One hint would come from the case of Zacchaeus, who became a believer after having dinner with Jesus (Lk. 19:1-10). These persons would be in stark contrast to the particular Pharisees, scribes, and other religious leaders who openly challenged Jesus’ teachings and were publicly rebuked for doing so.

This same differentiation can be seen in the early church. For example, throughout the entire book of Acts, the early leaders were often drawn to individuals such as Phillip and the Ethiopian eunuch (8:26-39), Peter and Cornelius (10:1-48), Paul and his companions, and Lydia (16:13-15). On other occasions, entire groups of people were open to the Gospel message. In fact, we are even told that Paul’s customary method of engaging such people was to visit a local synagogue and begin vigorous discussions regarding the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ (17:2-4). It seems that Paul had something like this in mind when he asserted that his methodology was to come to people as they were and take them from that point to the Gospel message (1 Cor. 9:19-22, especially v. 22b).

It is possible that the early church dealt more harshly with those within their own groups, whether believers or not, who were espousing false teachings. Examples would include Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1-11), Simon the Sorcerer (Acts 8:9-24), or Hymenaeus and Philetus (2 Tim. 2:14-19). In each of these cases, the emphasis is clearly on the affect

that these persons exercised on the local body of believers (see especially 2 Tim. 2:14,18).<sup>6</sup>

### *Contemporary Application*

How did I apply this to my own situation? Throughout the years, I have been contacted by hundreds of individuals who expressed religious questions or doubts. Generally, these persons fall into two broad categories, each with a fairly large range of variables within them. Many questioners express clearly their Christian faith, but sometimes the level of doubt is so severe that these individuals indicate that they are close to leaving the faith, however they define it. On the other hand, a good percentage of these contacts are individuals who clearly identify themselves as non-Christians. Usually, they are “seekers” or open-minded skeptics who sometimes simply wonder if there is any basis for the Christian faith.

In the large majority of cases, whatever the individual’s personal beliefs, they are chiefly interested in one or just a very few issues. We usually talk or e-mail briefly, and that is the end of the contact. But periodically it becomes obvious that a person is in need of an additional time commitment. Typically, this is either a believer who is very distraught, or a nonbeliever who is clearly open, seeking, and sometimes seemingly close to the Kingdom. To be approached by a person in the latter category is exhilarating.

In both cases, I look for individuals who are more interested in moving forward than they are in winning debates. Preferably, though not always, they are not overly protective of their own views and are good conversation partners. This is more important especially for those in the “seeker” category. But there comes a moment when a decision must be made regarding whether or not to extend the conversation to an indefinite period of time. This is where prayer becomes crucial. Whatever the individual case, my primary concern is to locate the right person who, as nearly as can be ascertained, can most be helped by a lengthier time



commitment.

I am always acutely aware that time is my major concern. To be clear, it is *never* the case that such a discussion with an individual is given a back seat to my free time. Individuals always win in such a scenario, because persons are to be valued above all. But such potential discussions must be evaluated in lieu of my other ministry commitments.

It is difficult to explain what actually happens next. Oftentimes the seeker/questioner simply ends the process, generally because he or she received the information for which they were looking. After a few contacts, it becomes obvious in the majority of situations if a person is a good candidate for the sort of help that the Lord has equipped me to give. At that point, I invite them into an ongoing dialogue, followed by regular appointments and discussions.

In recent years, I have usually kept running discussions with between a half-dozen and a dozen persons. Not all of them are active simultaneously. In fact, sometimes I grow convicted that a few individuals may have seemingly slipped to the sidelines. In such cases, I try to reopen the contact.

But in recent years, there has been a distinct change in the make-up of the group. Prior to the challenging question I described at the beginning of this essay, there were very few non-Christians on my list. So I began to stay alert specifically for such opportunities to befriend seekers. I often prayed that the Lord would direct me to those with whom he would have me talk. Accordingly, in the last few years, perhaps half or more of those on the list were unbelievers, while the others were believers who have doubts.

When I was initially challenged to take part in the lives of unbelievers, I was not sure what that might look like. Since then I have done a lot of thinking about the nature of friendship. Perhaps I should say a word here regarding some of the things I mean, as well as do not mean, by the term "friendship." It is definitely *not* a situation where I do all the talking and they do all the listening. Our discussions are fair, with each participant on an equal footing. I think the seekers themselves would say that they feel free to disagree or say whatever they would like to.

Neither am I some sort of mercenary, looking to “chalk up” another conversion. This is so for more than one reason. It must be remembered that each of these persons initiated the process by first contacting me; *they* asked me to help them. They usually described themselves as seekers or open-minded skeptics, and inquired as to what Christianity had to offer, beginning with the actual data. I could hardly fail to oblige them!

Further, and more crucially according to Scripture, I have absolutely no ability whatsoever to force or “power” anyone into the Kingdom of God. I have no ability to control or coerce a conversion. It is simply not a human prerogative. For that very reason, I like to pray that the result of a given situation not be by might, nor by power, but by God’s Spirit.<sup>7</sup> He must move in any situation if conversion is to result.

Additionally, Christians should be interested in far more than conversion alone. This makes follow-up and discipleship exceptionally crucial. Once again, this is the realm where the Holy Spirit works. There are too many situations where believers try to impress or out-think either unbelievers or young Christians, only to find the latter wandering away for no apparent reason. The Holy Spirit uses human instruments, but we certainly need his presence and power in these situations.

Returning to other aspects of friendship, we need to be there for these people whether or not they ever become Christians. Although we are generally much more focused on faith issues, on occasion we talk about politics or sports and never quite get to religious subjects. Other times, I end up trying to help with a totally different situation that has nothing to do with faith. These are some of things that friends do for friends.

The end result has been nothing short of incredible. During these last years, a fundamental principle I have held to is that persons are always to be valued above things. Therefore, with few exceptions, it is always the case that the needs of these persons are placed ahead of other items such as publishing deadlines. True, the latter also affect lives, but less directly. What could take precedence over real life situations where there is an opportunity to speak directly to another person when eternity hangs in the balance? What could be more important?

What about our earlier thoughts regarding Jesus and his apostles? How does all of this relate to them? It seems to me that both of my categories—seekers or fair-minded skeptics as well as believers with doubts—fit the categories that Jesus probably used when he was blamed with befriending sinners. I cannot think of a more likely scenario. We have said that the strong demand for Jesus' presence must be an indication that he had much to offer, even for those who did not believe the way he did. And as we look at the apostles such as Paul, at the very least, we see that he placed a priority on discussions and debates with unbelievers,<sup>8</sup> which indicates an incredible outlay of his time. It seems that there is no reason to abandon taking similar steps in the present.

I prefer not to address in detail the question of final "tallies" that the Lord has worked in individual lives, given my very strong conviction that these are the sorts of things that our left hand even keeps from our right. But it may be encouraging simply to note that God's Holy Spirit has worked wonderfully in the lives of a good number of skeptics and seekers, who today would announce that they are children of the Kingdom due to the diligent work of believers. Their later growth in discipleship is almost equally amazing. An even greater number of believers have turned decisively from their doubts. I continually marvel at the results when God gets involved in our lives!

## Notes

1. Mk. 2:13-17; Lk. 14:1, 12-13; 15:1-2; 19:1-7.
2. For example, see Marcus J. Borg, *Jesus, a New Vision: Spirit, Culture, and the Life of Discipleship* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1987), pp. 131-133; 145, note 26; 192.
3. Mk. 1:22, 27; 6:2-3; 12:17, 37; Mt. 7:28-29; Lk. 19:48.
4. This idea was suggested to me by a recent graduate student, Colin Martin, in a letter dated October 27, 2007.
5. Even though Jesus initiated the conversation, the woman at the well exhibited similar characteristics (Jn. 4:1-42).
6. This is Martin's suggestion. Like Acts 8:13, it is difficult to ascertain whether or not each of the individuals mentioned were truly believers. Whichever view is preferred, Martin's

suggestion would still apply.

7. This reference is obviously taken from Zechariah 4:6, where the context is somewhat different, but I think still applicable to my situation.
8. This is confirmed by the Greek terms used especially in Acts 13-19. As we saw earlier, such debates, dialogues, and other discussions were Paul's most used method according to Acts 17:24.