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What Topics Should I Cover in an Apologetics Series?

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#STRask - Stand to Reason

Questions about what topics to cover when presenting an apologetics series in a church and how to handle addressing people's doubts in an apologetics class when discussing them can confuse others and cause more doubts.

* What 4-6 topics would you recommend I cover in an apologetics series in my church?

* In apologetics meetings at my church, some members are helped by publicly talking about doubts and core questions, and some find these same discussions confusing and even doubt-inducing. How can one deal with this in a proper way?

Transcript

[Music] [Bell] Welcome to the #STRask podcast with Amy Hall and Greg Koukl. This is the poke- this- oh I can't even speak today, Greg! [Laughter] This is the podcast where we take your questions on Twitter. You can send those in with the hashtag #STRask and then we respond.

We'll head those days too, Amos. No worries. We don't edit this thing out.

We just let people live with it. I'll give them a good laugh today. Alright, here's a question from Josh Andrew Brown.

I'm a lead pastor in doing an apologetic series this year. What four to six topics/themes would you recommend be covered each week? My idea so far, the creative order, the problem of evil, the authority of Scripture in Christ. Well, those are really good issues to deal with.

They're foundational. And when I- when you recited that list, I thought of something familiar. It's called the story of reality.

And so when you begin, you start at the beginning. So if we are going to do a- defend our faith, our point of view, our belief system, then we have to have an accurate

foundation, foundational understanding of what the system is that we are defending. And so he mentioned first the creative order.

There may be an ambiguity there that I'd like to address. And if what he means is we start with God, then I think that's great. If he intends in the created order to get into the details about how creation took place, when it took place, and a role of Darwinian evolution in that process, if any, I think that's a big mistake.

All right? And the reason is, is we don't want to overcomplicate our task. It's already pretty hard. So our first task is to show that God is the foundation of our enterprise.

The story, as I put it in the story of reality, is about him. That's why it starts with him. So talking about God and the kind of God who is the foundation for our story, there are different characterizations of God, but God is spirit.

He's made a world that is both material and immaterial. Therefore, things like minds and ideas and spirits and demons and angels and miracles. All of these things are at home in our world.

And they're not extraneous. They're part of our story. And so that, I think that's the foundation that needs to be laid.

And then, of course, this personal God, then we have reasons to think there really is a personal God like this. And so when he mentioned, when Josh mentioned the created order, he might have been referring to the fact of the creation, the cosmos. And so there is an argument from the existence of the cosmos, a couple of them actually, for God as the best explanation.

Or there is an argument from the shape of the cosmos that it looks designed. And that's a different type of argument for the existence of God. All of that, I think, would be appropriate for the first session or the first module.

Maybe with what I've said, the module will go a little further than one session. But anyway, I think that has to be included. And it doesn't have to be complicated.

In one hour, it's possible to establish what their foundation is and then give some reasons why this personal God at this point, not distinguishing from the God of Islam or the God of Judaism, the other two major monotheistic religions. But just starting with the personal God, all of that characterization of him and some defense that this notion of God is actually sound. It's true.

That can be done in an hour, I think. If you limited to like a six week or seven weeks series, then the first one would be God. In fact, I think I did a solid ground on why God, this is about four years ago or three years ago, I did a series that year.

And the first one was why God and why did I start there because that's the foundation of the beginning. Okay. The other things that he mentioned include the problem of evil.

And I think that is a big pushback. All right. But I would position the issue of the problem of evil kind of as this, maybe the second session.

And as a pushback against God answering that, but that's the place to develop the moral argument for God. And I've done that in different ways that are available to him. And I'm sure Josh knows the details of that as he's teaching this, but the point here is there is a God.

We have a personal God first session. We know he's good because I'm sorry. We know he's there because the cosmos and the design, cosmological argument, teleological argument.

Next thing, what about the problem of evil? Well, actually, the problem of evil proves our God moral argument. And then do what he can to answer the problem of evil. Okay.

And what I will just give some strategic suggestion here. And that is, I think it's very hard to try to exhaustively answer the problem of evil. That is, that's what the Odyssey is meant to do.

It is meant to try to make sense of evil in a world where there's a good and powerful God. What did God have in mind? No, in the story of reality, I give one sense of this. And it actually, I just read something in C.S. Lewis that supported this.

And that that has to do with God wanting humans to develop virtue rather than just giving virtue to them. But that's just my ideas. The key here, apologetically, is to show that the problem of evil is not a good argument against God.

It's not a defeater to Christianity. It is actually an affirmation of a moral lawmaker. If there is evil in the world, then there must be broken laws.

And if there are broken laws that amount to the evil in the world, then those broken moral laws need a moral lawmaker. So that's the moral argument in short. And that's what I would.

That's the way I would position it. But I would not try to figure out why did God allow this? And there's the free world defense. There's all kinds of theodices out there.

And they all have a measure of speculation. My point is you don't have to answer why did God do this to show that the problem of evil is not an argument against God but for God. And so this is since it's apologetics, that's what I would stick to.

I'd limit it to that kind of thing. I don't know if you want to jump in on that particular point, Amy. No, go ahead.

Keep going. I have some thoughts. I'll add at the end.

Okay. Well, I don't want to hear about that. I'm like, here, if I shall speak here.

No, you have some good things to add. So God, then the problem of evil in the context of an argument against God, then I think you ought to have something about human beings. Now, this seems like a modest concern, but you know this, Amy, that a huge part of what's going on under culture right now, massive.

She's nodding in agreement. You can't see that. What does it mean to be human? And the answer the culture is giving is it means nothing.

It means nothing to be human. And of course, this is consistent with an atheistic view and it's also consistent with an evolutionary view because in both of those characterizations and they go together most of the time, there are no natures. And so there is no such thing as a human nature.

And strictly speaking, there is no such thing as a fixed human being. We are just in a matrix of, not a matrix, but a process of development from one thing over to another. You know, we just kind of go through phases over the billions of years or whatever.

So anyway, but this is critical. And the key thing is, I think the way Francis Schaefer put it was beautiful and when I put it beautiful and broken for noble and cruel as the way Schaefer puts it, but the whole idea is that we are made the image of God that gives us a grounding for magnificence. But we are terribly broken and fallen.

And so we are guilty. So that's really key. I mean, that's what I would focus on.

And that's what I did in the story of reality. And then the authority of scripture is really key. I proceed from man to Jesus.

And the reason is because the problem that God, I'm sorry, the problem that man created needed a solution, a rescue plan, and that's where Jesus comes in. And that would be the person and the work of Christ. Now, since these are Christians that you're talking with, I would save the authority of scripture till last.

And lay down these foundational things. God as the creator answering the problem of evil to show that it's not a capable defeater and it's not a problem for theists. It's a problem for atheists.

Excuse me. Then I would talk about who man is. And beautiful and broken.

Those are the two key parts. Then what's God's answer to the problem and that's the rescue plan that comes in Jesus. And that's also two parts.

The person who is Jesus and the work. Why did he come of Christ? Classic stuff. And then

I go, okay, here, get that.

If you understand that, then you know why Jesus is the only way. He's the only way he solves the problem of evil. It's all fits together.

And again, I just shamelessly commend the story of reality because it follows that pattern and shows how these are woven together in such a valuable way. But in the culture, the issue of scripture is really key. People do not.

They have all kinds of problem. Well, let me back up and put it this way. One of the biggest challenges we see in the culture right now, especially with those who are given to deconstruct and then eventually, deconvert from Christianity is scripture, what it says and what it means.

So that I think needs to be dealt with. And that is a bit of a challenging topic. Board of advice, I would not argue that the Bible is the inerrant word of God.

I believe that, but I do not think that this is a strategically sound approach with non-Christians. I would want to make my case for Jesus based on the historical reliability of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, the primary source historical documents, which we can do that. And, and, and argue from there to, from, to the resurrection as an historical event.

And then I would present the gospel, the Bible as a, as a book that, that claims to be from God, but has tremendous insight about the world and life and man's problem and whatever. And I, my conviction is that most people believe the Bible is the word of God, not because they have been argued into it with a series of reasons which we give at standard reason. And I, in a talk called has God spoken.

Right. And we went, you went over those things, I think just a few episodes ago. So maybe once we can do that.

But my point is, is that I think most people accept the Bible as the word of God when they engage it. And they, and then they, they, something happens when they do that. And so this is what we're doing.

We're giving them the story. It's interesting, you know, when we were talking about this earlier, Amy, in the book of Acts, we see the gospel preach. And it is characterized as the word of God.

Almost in no case is, are they giving words from the Bible? They are, they are summing up the content of the gospel in different ways and explaining and persuading. These are the words that are used. They are not quoting verses.

There weren't no verses to quote actually at that time for the New Testament. They were

giving the gospel, the word of God, which was contained in that general sense in the explanations that they were offering and about Jesus, etc. And so this is the same kind of thing that I'm talking about.

We tell people the biblical story. We explain what the word of God says, what it means in general so they can get it. We don't get into young earth creationism or the rapture, the second coming or Calvinism verses are many and as we don't get into any of that stuff.

It's that just creates problems at this level. We're just talking about the foundational things. So that's my theory.

So Greg, I wrote a post called five apologetics questions you need to think through and I think all of these fit into the framework of story of reality. But there's one thing you didn't mention specifically that I think could go, well, here are the five that I have, the existence of God, the goodness of God, the trustworthiness of the Bible, the resurrection and the gospel. So the existence of God, I think covering that first covers a lot of the things you said, Greg, but the goodness of God can fit into that also.

And that's something people have a lot of questions about. Yeah, that's right. But one, you know, I've thought about this because I know this is a challenge, but the challenge is if God doesn't let me, maybe God exists, but if he doesn't let me do whatever I want to do, especially sexually, he's not good.

That's the deal, right? That's one of the deals people have. Yeah, I mean, that's huge. That's huge.

But I think as a leveraging the moral argument, I think it's fair to say if God is not good, then there is no good of any kind. Yes, absolutely. So the kinds of things I think come up for people about the goodness, that's one of them, objections to the Old Testament.

Some of these you mentioned already, objections to the idea that Jesus is the only way, objections to hell. There are all sorts of things that people will have. So maybe as part of your session on the existence of God, you could open that up for questions if you don't want to introduce all of these things and have them present their issues that they have that they need to work through in terms of the goodness of God.

Mm-hmm. So you mentioned also trustworthiness of the Bible, the resurrection, and you even mentioned the gospel in the sense of giving the entire story and helping people to understand what's going on here, because I think you are assuming too much if you assume people understand what the gospel is. I'm sorry to say.

Yeah, in the church, you're referring to it. Yes, yes. You know, in the story of reality, Nancy Pearsy writes the wonderful introduction.

I'm always thankful to her for that. But she starts out by saying the gospel doesn't start

with Jesus. It's right there in her first paragraph.

The gospel doesn't start with Jesus. And this is what the point you're making. There is a story here that makes sense of Jesus arriving when he does to do what he does.

And if you don't understand that story, that predicate, if you will, then Jesus acts on loose significance. And this is one reason people get very confused about who Jesus is and why he came. And even on top of understanding, if you don't understand the gospel, then what exactly do you need apologetics for? If you're not using apologetics, if the goal of this is not ultimately to communicate the gospel to people and the idea that it's actually true, and it's a part of reality, then the entire enterprise of evangelism is useless.

You have to understand the gospel. So those are the things I would add to what you said, Greg. And I think the God-man-Jesus resurrection... Oh, come on, Jesus.

In the cross, in consequential detail resurrection, Amy was doing the five points of the reality outline there for the God-man-Jesus cross resurrection. And here the final resurrection is in view. So you got the beginning and the end kind of anchoring that series.

That's a great framework. That's a great framework because any apologize... So easy to remember, Amy. Any apologetics you add will fit into that framework because it's the overall story.

So Greg, to go along with that question, here is one from Johannes who's writing from Germany. For some members of a church's apologetic meanings, publicly talking about doubts and core questions seems very important and essential. For others, these same discussions are more confusing and sometimes even doubt inducing.

How can one deal with this in a proper way? This is a really important thing to talk about. And I think... Now, I'm presuming that Johannes has some attempts at doing group things where people express doubts and has had mixed responses. Sometimes this works out fine and sometimes it just increases doubts.

So I'm just going on that assumption. By the way, I think these kinds of sessions are fabulous. Absolutely fabulous.

One of the big reasons young people are deconstructing, which means they're being encouraged to take a look at everything they believe and to doubt it. And then this leads frequently to the conversion, then they go elsewhere, is because people aren't answering their questions. And it's madness to me.

When I hear young people say, "Well, I've asked questions and I'm just told to be quiet. Don't ask those questions. Just have faith or something like that." It's hard to know how

thoroughgoing that pattern is, but I certainly have heard about it a lot.

It's the worst thing you can do in my view. Well, what if we don't know the answers someone might say and that just increases doubt if we can't give answers? Oh, I get that. You've got to get the answers.

This is part of discipleship. Now, it doesn't mean you have to have them at the top of your head. That you've got to be spouting them all off, you know, because I can't even do that with everything.

Amy can't. So, here's what I suggest for those times where questions are asked. And that is, if you have like a weekly session, when people ask questions, if there are questions that the person who's doing the answering does not have the resources to answer, if it is left alone can't answer that, then that's an opportunity for doubt.

The person who answers the questions without doesn't have his doubt resolved. And those who weren't thinking about that question, now it's bothering them. The result, I'm not the result, the antidote is that the person who's in charge of answering the questions has a whole week now to go back and figure out the answer to that question.

And the resources are abundant. There are, you know, a mouse click away, literally. And if you go to str.org, it's a good place to start because there's hardly anything that has been a challenge to Christianity that one of our team members has not addressed well.

And we are just one player in a massive field of Christian workers. We have a deep, deep, deep bench. So, this is able to be a result.

So, have your Q&A sessions answer what you can well, and what you can't answer well, pick it up, okay, next week we're going to come back to this thing because I don't have the goods yet. And then get the goods, and then come back and start out your next session. Here are the two things that I was, three things, whatever it is that I was not able to give a good answer for last week.

But here is the thought I have now based on my research. And so, if you do it that way, it gives the people freedom to ask whatever questions they want, get some answers, questions that aren't answered immediately because it's just out of the scope of the person answering the question to deal with can be answered the following week or so when that person has some time to do some research. So, it seems to me that's the best of both worlds.

Yeah, that's a good idea, Greg. I think if you want even more control over what is being put out there because obviously the more things that are put out there that you can't answer, the more doubts people are going to have over that week, even if you have an answer, you might not be able to get to everything. What you could do is have people submit the questions in advance.

They could email you or they could text you as you're sitting there in real time. You could take a look, answer the ones that you can answer then, and then just do this as a regular event. So, they know that there will be another time where they'll have their question answered, but that way you can prepare ahead of time.

You're not going to be blindsided by something you don't know. You can work your way methodically through the questions, but you don't bring up things that you can't answer in the moment. That's good.

That's a good point. I think there are a lot of ways to do it. It depends on who your audience is.

Maybe you have some who really don't know anything about apologetics and they're maybe very fragile and don't have a lot of trust that there are answers out there. So, you can adjust this in terms of how mature and knowledgeable the people in your class already are, because if they already have a foundation of apologetics, then if they hear something they don't know about, they're not likely to panic. They probably would just say, "Oh, that's an interesting question and they'll have the patience for it." So, I think you just kind of need to evaluate and have a sense of who your people are and where they are and just control how much gets out there that is not yet answered.

Amy, let me offer just a little tweak on your suggestion, which I think is really great. Actually, when I do Q&As with audiences in a church, oftentimes this is the way it's done on cards, pastor reads off the question, or people text it in or something. There's a small liability with not being able to engage the person who's asking the question, and that is when there are ambiguities in the question.

Of course, most people know that the first step of the game plan, tactical game plan is to gather information and you do that with a question, "What do you mean by that?" So, when there are questions that are asked, lots of times there's ambiguities in the question. I actually like working with the individual to be able to clarify. So, if it turns out you're reading a card from somebody in the audience, and then you say, "Okay, well, I'm not sure about this.

Who is it that raises this question because I have a clarification question for you? Okay, Bob, yeah. Let me ask you about this. When you said this, did you mean this or did you mean this other thing here?" And so, there's a little engagement that's involved that helps you to clarify some things, if necessary, but it also allows you to manage which questions you deal with at any particular time, which is what you had suggested.

Good job. And as long as you do this regularly, you can work methodically through all these questions and people will be patient, I'm sure. That's a great idea, Johannes.

It is a fabulous idea. Well, thank you so much for your questions. We look forward to

hearing from you on Twitter with the hashtag #STRSK.

This is Amy Hall and Greg Cockel for Stand to Reason.

[Music]

(upbeat music)