The Person-Centered Approach to Apologetics

The formal study of communication has a rich history.¹ Despite this history, the discipline’s application and epistemological perspectives are continually debated.² A simple definition for communication is that it is the process of exchanging symbols.³ The Christian Apologist needs to study communication and needs to be familiar with persuasion and rhetorical theory. This position is best observed by looking at the example of Paul in Athens. In his discourse on Mars Hill, Paul applies persuasive techniques by quoting lines from pagan poets, and mentioning an inscription “to an unknown god” (Acts 17:23).⁴ Many in the audience did not accept Paul’s message, but his ability to engage the minds of those present is worth review for both the rhetorical critic and the apologist.

Communication Theorist Carl Rogers might describe Paul’s defense as being a message of unconditional positive regard, empathic understanding, and congruency.⁵ Rogers was not an apologist, but his theory the Person-Centered Approach to Communication is a powerful tool for one wanting to offer a defense of the Christian faith. This essay will explore the Person-Centered Approach and address how applying this theory will benefit apologists.

According to Kischenbaum and Jourdan, “From January 1, 1987 to September 6, 2004, 141 books, 174 book chapters, and 462 journal articles appeared on Carl Rogers or the client-

²Ibid.
centered/person-centered approach. Rogers’ theory has impacted various disciplines, but it has yet to be applied to apologetics. Rogers recognized that dialogue is a powerful force and its lasting impacts can be easily overlooked. Returning to the Pauline defense on Mars Hill, one can observe that Paul presented a position that conflicted with the views of his hearers. Paul, knowing many would simply dismiss his discourse, still addressed his audience with regard, he communicated his understanding of their culture, and he engaged his hearers with sincerity. Paul used all three components of the Person-Centered Approach.

Rogers held a worldview synonymous to that of all Christian apologist. He believed in the sacredness of humanity and in the value of dialogue. Through his research, he was convinced that individuals experience both personality and relationship change when they felt appreciated during a discussion. Rogers believed that persuasion in interpersonal dialogue can be achieved when one individual approaches others from a position of sincerity and understanding. When engaging in discussion with an unbeliever, an apologist would benefit greatly by applying the Rogerian approach. An apologist implementing the Person-Centered Approach would maintain a perspective that views others as sacred and seeks to understand their world view. Simply being an effective listener and not yielding ground to a lost person offers a sense of genuineness that eludes most apologetic encounters.

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9 Griffin, p. 45.
Every apologist was at one time lost in sin and separated from God. This former position must never leave the mind of an apologist seeking to reason with a person dead in sin. At the heart of a Christian apologist is the desire to:

Set apart the Messiah as Lord in your hearts. Always be ready to give a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you. However, do this with gentleness and respect, keeping your conscience clear, so that when you are accused, those who denounce your Christian life will be put to shame (1 Peter 3:15-16).

Successful apologetics hinges on the application of effective communication. Persuasion theory asserts that one must know the needs of an audience in order to be a successful speaker. An apologist knows the spiritual depravity that plagues all lost individuals. Speaking to those needs has to be the primary focus of an apologetic conversation. Ken Boa, commenting on the functions of apologetics noted “The fourth function [of apologetics] is persuasion.” While persuasion has often been viewed as a dirty word, it is necessary for an apologist to recognize the significance persuasion has in apologetics.

While engaging in the sometime heated practice of apologetics, one must remember that one’s goal is not to win an argument. An apologist’s goal is “to persuade people to commit their lives and eternal futures into the trust of the Son of God who died for them (emphasis added).”

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14 Boa, p. xxv.
There is a tendency in a heated disagreement to become domineering.\textsuperscript{15} This behavior destroys dialogue and the opportunity to present truth in love. A lost person walking away from such an encounter will not walk away thinking they lost an argument, rather, they will walk away spiritually embittered. When an apologist prioritizes the person they are speaking to by maintaining unconditional positive regard, empathic understanding, and congruency, an apologist can make an impact that resonates into eternity.

Christians cannot predict when they will be called on to present a defense. God’s word encourages believers to “preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction” (2 Timothy 4:2). Apologists have a calling to prioritize the message of the gospel. Adopting a \textit{Person-Centered Approach} by not focusing on winning an argument could greatly empower the impact of an apologist. There are few, if any, publications advocating for a Rogerian approach to apologetics. This essay has opened the door for further discussion about the expansion and application of this theory to apologetics.

Many apologist are ignorant in regards to the discipline of communication and persuasion theory. Having a practical understanding of communication and persuasion only enhances the apologist’s tool kit. Paul’s ability to apply some components of the \textit{Person-Centered Approach} proved useful on Mars Hill. Those same tenants are useful today, accessible today, but are shamefully neglected by the vast majority of apologist. A knowledge of communication theory, which includes rhetorical and persuasion theory, needs to be embraced by Christian apologists.

Bibliography


