



DEFENDING

THE

GOSPEL



WHAT TO SAY
WHEN PEOPLE CHALLENGE
YOUR FAITH



Kel Richards



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THE

GOSPEL

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matthiasmedia

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Chapter 1

DEFENDING, ANSWERING AND GIVING REASONS



IT CAN BE A VERY TENSE MOMENT. It can involve looking down at your feet and shuffling your shoes. 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 your Christian faith—and you realize that you haven't 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 guess I might say, “Well, it’s a good thing that Christianity’s not a religion then, isn’t it?” That’s a sufficiently provocative statement to get a conversation going. Later in this book, I’ll explain the thinking behind that response—and how it can be useful.

If I was talking to someone a little older, with a little more experience of life, I might respond by saying, “As we get older we all discover that we need support in life, don’t we? And when it comes to support, belief is better than booze. But only if it’s belief in the truth, of course. That’s probably why Jesus said that believing in him was like standing on solid rock.”

And that might get a useful conversation going.

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.

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 those things is in 1 Peter 3:15-16:

... but in your hearts regard 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 because they are either now experiencing persecution, or are about to. 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. One of his main reasons for writing is to tell them how to cope with persecution.

Peter's advice is: 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)

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).

Your response might be: if ever I find myself facing persecution, I'll bear that in mind. It is easy to make the assumption that while there are places where Christians are still being persecuted for the sake of Jesus Christ, it is 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 Jesus had to suffer.

You could be forgiven for thinking that the gospels treat shame, humiliation and mockery as a more significant persecution than torture.

This was certainly a component 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 Peter's readers were facing. And so are we.

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. It's employed as a term of abuse designed to embarrass anyone who reads their Bible and takes it seriously.



*The Da Vinci Code*¹ is persecution (in this sense of the word), 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, Peter's 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.

And what is it 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 (the homework) that will equip them to "make a defence". Have you been doing your homework?

¹ Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code*, Transworld Publishers, London, 2003.



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.

There are two ways in which people can ask. They can use a straightforward 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 effectively asking for “a reason for the hope that is in you”. They want you to respond.

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 asking 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 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 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 had 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 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, the wealth of the Vatican, or cheesy televangelists. 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 churchgoing parent or an insensitive Sunday School teacher. We don’t have to defend 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**.

Why should we do this? Because doing this is part of “in your hearts regard[ing] Christ the Lord as holy”.



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.

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

Conduct yourselves wisely 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 this is a general command, applicable to all Christians, about how they are to behave towards unbelievers. As expressed by Paul, this instruction has several components.

Firstly, our conduct is on view here. We are to conduct ourselves wisely 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 will certainly help to recommend any answers we give.

Secondly, our time belongs to Jesus. We are to make the best use of it we can. If we have a choice between discussing the weather (or the football, or last night’s television) 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.

Thirdly, 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.

Fourthly, 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 conversation become exactly like the lives and conversations of the unbelievers around us then we are useless. Our role, in whatever situation we find ourselves, is to be different. This, of course, invites 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.

Fifthly, we are to “know how ... to answer each person”. This is that familiar instruction to be prepared (to do our homework) expressed in slightly different words.

These two statements from Peter and Paul record a command from God that works out as being a series of steps:



1. Do your homework (be prepared).
2. As a result, know how to reason and answer.
3. Live Christianly, so that if people around you have questions or comments about Christianity, you'll be the person they ask.
4. Listen attentively for the various ways in which people 'ask' (with statements as well as questions).
5. Give your reasons and answers gently, graciously and respectfully.

If we do these 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.

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. Indeed, 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 it. Don't. Much better to draw a deep breath and say, "What do you mean by that?" Let people you are responding to explain themselves. It may be that what really troubles them is not quite what you had first assumed it to be. As they go on speaking, you will start to understand what really troubles them and what you really need to be answering.

Furthermore, we earn the right to speak by being willing to listen. If we will give them time, and listen patiently and sympathetically, then 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 five steps that are part of obeying this command, we will be 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 this 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.

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.

Of course, there are plenty of unbelievers who will remain unbelievers even after the gospel has been explained and defended. But those 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). 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 need to be clear. We need to give honest, biblical reasons and answers, and leave the rest to the power of 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 is to learn the gospel.

There are a number of helpful gospel outlines available, however, this guidebook is going to use the



*Two Ways to Live*² gospel outline. 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 world view. And that's powerful in an age in which so many people don't understand (or confidently misunderstand) the Bible's world view.

If you prefer another gospel outline, I'm certain you'll find that the material in the following chapters 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 then 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 **when** is **now** and **always**: now is the time to be doing your homework; and you should always be ready to respond (always ready to answer, defend and give reasons).

² Phillip D. Jensen and Tony Payne, *Two ways to live: the choice we all face*, Matthias Media, Sydney, 2003.



IN SUMMARY:

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



Two Ways to Live: an outline of the gospel³

1 | God is the loving maker and ruler of the world

God is the loving ruler of the world.

He made the world.

He made us rulers of the world under him.



The Bible says:

You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honour and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being.

REVELATION CHAPTER 4, VERSE 11

But is that the way it is now?

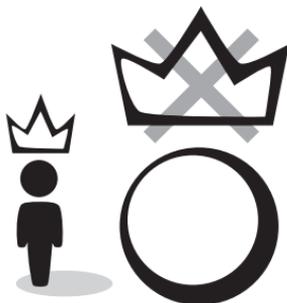
³ Bible verses in this gospel outline are from the New International Version (NIV).



2 | Humanity is in rebellion

We all reject the ruler—God—by trying to run life our own way without him.

But we fail to rule ourselves or society or the world.



The Bible says:

There is no-one righteous, not even one; there is no-one who understands, no-one who seeks God. All have turned away.

ROMANS CHAPTER 3, VERSES 10-12

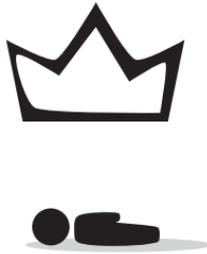
What will God do about this rebellion?



3 | God won't let people go on rebelling forever

God won't let us rebel forever.

God's punishment for rebellion is death and judgement.



The Bible says:

Man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgement.

HEBREWS CHAPTER 9, VERSE 27

God's justice sounds hard. But ...



4 | Jesus is the man who dies for rebels

Because of his love, God sent his Son into the world:
the man Jesus Christ.

Jesus always lived under God's rule.

Yet by dying in our place he took our punishment
and brought forgiveness.



The Bible says:

*Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous
for the unrighteous, to bring you to God.*

I PETER CHAPTER 3, VERSE 18

But that's not all ...



5 | Jesus is the risen ruler

God raised Jesus to life again as the ruler of the world.

Jesus has conquered death, now gives new life,
and will return to judge.



The Bible says:

*In his great mercy he has given us new birth
into a living hope through the resurrection of
Jesus Christ from the dead.*

I PETER CHAPTER I, VERSE 3

Well, where does that leave us?



6 | The two ways to live

A. OUR WAY:

- Reject the ruler—God
- Try to run life our own way

Result:

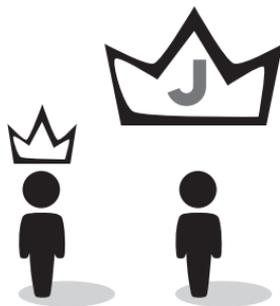
- Condemned by God
- Facing death and judgement

B. GOD'S NEW WAY:

- Submit to Jesus as our ruler
- Rely on Jesus' death and resurrection

Result:

- Forgiven by God
- Given eternal life



The Bible says:

Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him.

JOHN CHAPTER 3, VERSE 36

Which of these represents the way you want to live?



Appendix

DISCUSSION GUIDE



THE QUESTIONS THAT FOLLOW are designed to help you discuss the content of *Defending the Gospel* with others—your spouse, or a friend, or the small group you meet with at church. Use these questions as a way of talking back over the content of each chapter, and encouraging each other to put God’s word into practice.

Chapter 1: Defending, answering and giving reasons

1. Read 1 Peter 3:15-16. How are you currently responding to this command of Scripture?
2. What steps does the chapter recommend we take?
3. Read Colossians 4:2-6. In what situations do you have opportunities to answer graciously?

