



8. Giving reasons for your faith

How do we go about explaining the gospel in the twenty-first century?

How do we do this as a Methodist Church?

Introduction

One of the key questions at the Evangelism Consultation focused on how Methodists can give reasons for their faith in twenty first-century Britain. Theologically, giving reasons for your faith is known as ‘apologetics’, and has been part of the Christian tradition from its earliest stages.

The online responses to the evangelism survey included a call for Christian responses to secularists and the ‘new atheists’, which might include demonstrating that there is no real conflict between religion and science. Other contributors spoke of the need to show that Christian faith is relevant to everyday life, while some noted the need for ‘academics’ and others within the Connexion who can rise to the challenge of intellectually defending the faith.

Why this matters

1 Peter 3:15-16 provides a classic admonition to give reasons for our faith: “always be ready to make your defence to anyone who demands from you an account of the hope that is in you, yet do it with gentleness and reverence”(NRSV). The sermons in Acts also demonstrate how the early preachers of the Church adapted their sermons to respond the culture and academic background of their audiences (eg Acts 17:16-34), and such examples can help us reflect on our apologetics today.

Within the Methodist tradition, explaining why faith is ‘reasonable’ has a long pedigree. One way of expressing this has been through the ‘Wesley Quadrilateral’, which highlights the importance of reason and experience – alongside Scripture and tradition – in theological reflection. This does not mean

that Methodists change their faith to suit the context, but rather that Methodists consider carefully how best to express their faith reasonably.

At the consultation, the discussion initially focused on the meaning of ‘apologetics’. One participant suggested that apologetics is “conversation that creates fertile ground for evangelism”, but there was also a concern that apologetics should always be pursued in a context of living and sharing the faith naturally. The group also discussed a range of challenges to apologetics today. These ranged from ‘church factors’ – such as a lack of confidence, the sacred-secular divide, and the theological breadth of the church – to ‘social factors’ – such as the media portrayal of faith, the seeming irrelevance of faith, and consumerism.

In response to such challenges, participants made suggestions such as creating space for experiencing faith, finding a new kind of language, and having access to good resources on apologetics. In terms of the practice of apologetics, the group highlighted the importance of telling stories, listening to others, acknowledging humility, and recognising context.

Further resources

- There are many resources on apologetics that present the case for Christianity against its detractors. A recent work that many have found helpful is Timothy Keller’s *The Reason for God: belief in an age of scepticism* (London, Hodder & Stoughton, 2009).
- For a website that offers a host of resources for exploring and communicating the Christian faith, see www.bethinking.org.
- For a range of resources on evangelism, visit www.methodist.org.uk/deepening-discipleship/evangelism/resources.

Questions for discussion

The following questions are suggested as ways of taking the conversation forward.

1. How has your faith been challenged within contemporary culture?

2. How have you responded to such challenges?

3. What reasons would you give for being a Christian?

4. How can your church help its members gain confidence in talking about the reasons for their faith?