Introduction

Recovering the Lost Art

We are all apologists now, and we stand at the dawn of the grand age of human apologetics, or so some are saying because our wired world and our global era are a time when expressing, presenting, sharing, defending and selling ourselves have become a staple of everyday life for countless millions of people around the world, both Christians and others. The age of the Internet, it is said, is the age of the self and the selfie. The world is full of people full of themselves. In such an age, “I post, therefore I am.”

To put the point more plainly, human interconnectedness in the global era has been raised to a truly global level, with unprecedented speed and on an unprecedented scale. Everyone is now everywhere, and everyone can communicate with everyone else from anywhere and at any time, instantly and cheaply. Communication through the social media in the age of email, text messages, cell phones, tweets and Skype is no longer from “the few to the many,” as in the age of the book, the newspaper and television, but from “the many to the many,” and all the time.

One of the effects of this level of globalization is plain. Active and interactive communication is the order of the day. From the shortest texts and tweets to the humblest website, to the angriest blog, to the most visited social networks, the daily communications of the wired world attest that everyone is now in the business of relentless self-promotion—presenting themselves, explaining themselves, defending themselves, selling themselves or sharing their inner thoughts and emotions as never before in human history.
That is why it can be said that we are in the grand secular age of apologetics. The whole world has taken up apologetics without ever using or knowing the idea as Christians understand it. We are all apologists now, if only on behalf of "the Daily Me" or "the Tweeted Update" that we post for our virtual friends and our cyber community. The great goals of life, we are told, are to gain the widest possible public attention and to reach as many people in the world with our products—and always, our leading product is Us.

Are Christians ready for this new age? We who are followers of Jesus stand as witnesses to the truth and meaning of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus as a central matter of our calling. We are spokespersons for our Lord, and advocacy is in our genes. Ours is the apologetic faith par excellence. But regardless of the new media, many of us have yet to rise to the challenge of a way of apologetics that is as profound as the good news we announce, as deep as the human heart, as subtle as the human mind, as powerful and flexible as the range of people and issues that we meet every day in our extraordinary world in which "everyone is now everywhere."

What does "the grand age of apologetics" mean for us as followers of Jesus? The full scope of this overall task is far larger than my particular concern in this book. But on the one hand, our age is quite simply the greatest opportunity for Christian witness since the time of Jesus and the apostles, and our response should be to seize the opportunity with bold and imaginative enterprise. If ever the "wide and effective door" that St. Paul wrote of has been reopened for the gospel, it is now.

On the other hand, we have to face up to the many challenges of the new age of communication with realism, for there are oddities in the age of communication that make it actually harder to communicate well today, rather than easier. And we also have to face the fact that the global era has shown up weaknesses in our present approaches to sharing the faith that must be remedied—above all because many attempts at Christian apologetics have been caught in the turbulent wake of the massive crossover between the grand philosophies of modernism and postmodernism.

This book is therefore about an issue that is timely and urgent—remedying a central and serious shortcoming in Christian communication today, and about a broader vision of advocacy to help us go forward to make the most of this new moment. For those who want to explore the wider issues of apologetics, there are many excellent books available. *Christian Apologetics Past and Present*, edited by William Edgar and Scott Oliphant, presents a magisterial anthology of the best of apologetics down the centuries. A *History of Apologetics* by Avery Cardinal Dulles provides a superb overview of the discipline. Among the best grand summaries of contemporary apologetic issues by Christian philosophers are the *Handbook of Christian Apologetics* by Peter Kreeft and Ronald Tacelli, and *Christian Apologetics* by Douglas Groothuis. And the *New Dictionary of Christian Apologetics* represents a goldmine of an encyclopedia on the topic.1

This book focuses on a narrower issue and a simple problem: *We have lost the art of Christian persuasion and we must recover it*. Evangelism is alive and well in the rapidly growing churches of the Global South, where the challenge is to recover an ardor for discipleship and a discernment of the modern world to match the zeal for evangelism. But in the advanced modern world, which is both pluralistic and post-Christian, our urgent need is for the recovery of persuasion in order to address the issues of the hour. Some branches of the Western church have effectively abandoned evangelism, for various reasons, and others speak as if Christian truths and beliefs are always and readily understandable to everyone, whatever the state of their listeners' hearts and whatever the character of their audience's worldview and culture. Others again have come to rely on formulaic, cookie-cutter approaches to evangelism and apologetics as if all who hear them are the same.

This combination of the abandonment of evangelism, the divorce between evangelism, apologetics and discipleship, and the failure to appreciate true human diversity is deeply serious. It is probably behind the fact that many Christians, realizing the ineffectiveness of many current approaches and sensing the unpopularity and implausibility of much Christian witness, have simply fallen silent and given up evangelism altogether, sometimes relieved to mask their evasion under a newfound passion for social justice that can forget the gaucheness of evangelism. At best, many of us who take the good news of Jesus seriously are eager and ready to share the good news when we meet people who are open, interested or in need of what we have to share. But we are less effective when we encounter people who are not open, not interested or not needy—in other words, people who are closed, indifferent, hostile, skeptical or apathetic, and therefore require persuasion.
In short, many of us today lack a vital part of a way of communicating that is prominent in the Gospels and throughout the Scriptures, but largely absent in the church today—persuasion, the art of speaking to people who, for whatever reason, are indifferent or resistant to what we have to say. They simply do not agree with us and are not open to what we have to say.

Loss of persuasion? It might seem bizarre, almost unimaginable, that Christian communication has lost something so central to its mission. Yet in profound ways it has, and that is why our challenge is to think about apologetics in ways that are not only fresh but faithful and independent—faithful in the sense that they are shaped by the imperatives of Christian truths, and independent in the sense that they are not primarily beholden to ways of thinking that are alien to Christian ways of thinking. That is why this book is not only about the lost art of Christian persuasion. It is also about an “advocacy of the heart,” an existential approach to sharing our faith that I believe is deeper and more faithful as well as more effective than the common approaches used by many. Christian advocacy has had many conversation partners down the centuries—particularly the great tradition of classical rhetoric established by the Greeks and the Romans. It has also had many opponents and sparring partners—most recently the bracing challenge of the new atheists. But for all the undoubted benefits of these challenges, one of the more unfortunate side effects is that much apologetics has lost touch with evangelism and come to be all about “arguments,” and in particular about winning arguments rather than winning hearts and minds and people. Our urgent need today is to reunite evangelism and apologetics, to make sure that our best arguments are directed toward winning people and not just winning arguments, and to seek to do all this in a manner that is true to the gospel itself.

The fact is that much contemporary advocacy ignores the deeper understandings of the spiritual and philosophical ways in which people think through their faiths, change their faiths, and the impact of their cultures and their ways of life on their thinking and beliefs. Even more importantly, today’s advocacy often ignores the crucial biblical understanding of the anatomy of human unbelief, how God addresses those who ignore or reject him, and how we too are to learn to address people wherever they are and whatever they think about God or the church or us. The heart of the problem is quite literally the problem of the heart.

My own journey to faith was more than intellectual, but it included a long, slow, critical debate in my mind during my school years. On one side, I listened to the arguments of such famous atheists as Friedrich Nietzsche, Jean Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, and on the other side to such Christian thinkers as Blaise Pascal, Fyodor Dostoevsky, G. K. Chesterton and C. S. Lewis. But if the approach advocated here is rare today, it is definitely not unique to me. I merely sit on the shoulders of certain giants of the faith who have gone before. My debts to these giants will become clear as we proceed, and I am equally clear about my own inadequacies in following their example. But together we must rise to the challenge of our time: How can we speak for our Lord in a manner that does justice to the wonder of who God is, to the profundity of the good news he has entrusted to us, to the wily stubbornness of the human heart and mind, as well as to the wide-ranging challenges of today’s world and the mind-boggling prospects of tomorrow’s? In short, how can we as followers of Jesus be as truly persuasive as we desire to be? Nothing less than that is the goal of our exploration.
THE COLORFUL AND CONTROVERSIAL NOVELIST Norman Mailer was once invited to speak at the University of California Berkeley. It was at a time when he was notorious for his scathing dismissals of the women's movement and had bragged publicly that he was a "champion male chauvinist pig." Many women students were incensed at the brazen way he flaunted his bigotry and the fact that he had been invited in the first place, so a large group of feminists decided to come to the lecture and give him such a roasting that he would regret accepting the invitation. In their view Mailer was a rank and shameless misogynist, and he needed to be put in his place.

As several accounts of the incident go, the air was crackling as Mailer entered the lecture room. He had been warned in advance that the feminists would be hostile and were lying in wait for him. Mailer strode confidently through the crowd, stepped up to the podium and announced that he had important things to say, so those who wished to hiss and boo should get it out at once. He then threw down the gauntlet: "Everybody in this hall who regards me as a male chauvinist pig, hiss."

As if perfectly on cue, the feminists broke out at once in loud, derisive hissing and booing, which rose to a crescendo of long, sustained jeering and barracking, punctuated with derisive cat calls and wolf whistles from men in other parts of the lecture room. For a while there was pandemonium, but inevitably it had to die down. The feminists could not keep up the booing forever, and the hubbub subsided. Mailer stepped back to the microphone, looked over to them, paused just a second or two, and said, "Obedient little women, aren't you?" (To sanitize his words somewhat.)
For a second or so the outcome hung in the balance. The ploy could have bombed and set off chaos, but it worked. The hostile tension collapsed. Mailer had shown a canny mastery of his audience, and many laughed and applauded. By all accounts, even some of the hardcore feminists were so stunned at falling for his ploy that from then on they listened in a rueful silence.

Mailer, of course, was as scathing and dismissive of the Christian faith as he was of women and anyone else with whom he disagreed, and his misogyny was inexcusable. His arrogant chauvinism toward women, amplified by the stories of his six marriages, was light years away from the example and teaching of Jesus. Our Lord always treated women with a respect and dignity that stands out from his own age and shines across all ages. But we who are followers of Jesus should consider one thing: Mailer’s bigotry and the substance of his argument was as far from Jesus as anyone could be, but the style in which he communicated was closer to Jesus than many of us who are followers of Jesus.

What Mailer did was what I call creative persuasion or subversion through surprise. To people predisposed to reject what he had to say, he communicated in a way that made them see his point—despite themselves.

Such creative persuasion, conducted according to the way of Jesus and the Scriptures, is critical for the church today because we who are Western Christians suffer from a glaring weakness that we need to face candidly. Let me state the problem again: Almost all our witnessing and Christian communication assumes that people are open to what we have to say, or at least are interested, if not in need of what we are saying. Yet most people quite simply are not open, not interested and not needy, and in much of the advanced modern world fewer people are open today than even a generation ago. Indeed, many are more hostile, and their hostility is greater than the Western church has faced for centuries. Through the explosion of pluralism in the last fifty years, our world has grown dramatically more diverse, and through the intensification of the culture warring in many Western countries, our world has grown far more dismissive of our faith. In short, the public squares in many of our nations are more secular and the private spheres are more diverse. We therefore have to speak many languages, and not just “Christian,” and we have to be persuasive when we address minds and hearts that often listen to us with a
default position of prejudice, scorn, impatience and sometimes anger.

To be sure, every single human being on God’s earth is open, interested and needy at some point in their lives—and when they are, we should always be ready, willing and able to speak and point them to the one who is the center and soul of all that makes life meaningful and worthwhile for us. But there are profound theological reasons why most people are not open and interested most of the time, and there are historical and cultural reasons why more people are more closed, hostile or indifferent in the West today than they were in the time of our grandparents. In the world of today we again and again have to face the fact that the world that earlier generations knew has gone, and gone for forever.

**Hoist by His Own Petard**

Our guiding inspiration for Christian advocacy can hardly be Norman Mailer’s prejudice, craftily defended though it was. So consider a biblical example of the same creative persuasion—the story of the prophet Micaiah, recounted in 1 Kings 22:1-28. At some unspecified year in the history of Israel after the division of the kingdom, King Jehoshaphat of Judah went up from Jerusalem to Samaria to confer with his royal cousin, King Ahab of Israel. They were forging an alliance to recapture some disputed territory taken by the Syrians. The questions before their Joint Council of War were simple. Should they forge an alliance and attack the Syrians with their combined forces? And would such a campaign have the backing of God and end in victory?

The natural step was to call out Samaria’s court prophets and enlist God’s backing for their plan. What else are clergy for, it seems, in times of conflict? Blessing the bombers is surely central to being a bishop. In this instance the court prophets were obliging, and they offered a unanimous opinion that just happened to be exactly what the two kings were hoping to hear. With one voice, all four hundred prophets declared that the two kings should “Attack and win!” To reinforce their message, some of the prophets—skilled communicators in a manner that would delight modern communication aficionados—created visual aids to illustrate their message. One prophet, a certain Zedekiah, brought ox horns that he brandished to show how the two noble kings would gore the enemy and drive everything before them.

Doubtless, it was an impressive performance and had its intended impact.
on its royal listeners. Yet for some reason, King Jehoshaphat, who unlike Ahab was loyal to the God of Israel, was not satisfied by this unanimous vote from Ahab’s court prophets. He therefore asked his royal ally if he had any other prophets from whom they might inquire.

“Yes,” Ahab replied, “there is one other, but he always prophesies negatively about me.”

Strike one against the prophet Micaiah: he was always negative about Ahab. But when King Ahab sent the royal servant to collect Micaiah, the strike count quickly got worse. “Everyone else has prophesied victory, so mind you say the same thing too,” he was told in effect. In other words, Micaiah was brought to the war council and found himself hopelessly out of line with all the other prophets, but under strict orders to fall in line and say exactly what the others had said—in short, to prophesy falsely.

Stunningly, that is exactly what Micaiah did as he began. He prophesied falsely like the others. “As the Lord lives,” he had told the king’s servant, “what the Lord says to me, that I will I speak.” But despite that, or perhaps even inspired directly by the Lord to prophesy falsely as other prophets had done earlier in Israel’s history, he went along with the other prophets, and echoed what they had said precisely: “Attack and win!”

It was then Ahab’s turn to be suspicious. Could Micaiah really be agreeing for once with his own court prophets? Was there a hint in the way Micaiah was speaking that he was being tongue-in-cheek? Was his answer on this occasion so out of line with what he normally said that the king was put on the alert? Or was there somehow the suggestion that Micaiah was telling the truth but leaving out a vital part of the answer that would change everything—that their forces would in fact win, for example, but that one of the kings would die in the battle, perhaps even Ahab himself?

Whatever it was that troubled Ahab, he broke into Micaiah’s pronouncement before the prophet had finished. “How many times shall I make you swear,” Ahab thundered with a hypocrisy that must have been comic to everyone present, “that you speak to me nothing but the truth in the name of the Lord?”

To which Micaiah answered simply, “I saw all Israel scattered on the mountain as sheep that have no shepherd.” In other words, “The truth is, your Majesty, that your people will be leaderless because you are about to die.”

The effect must have been stunning. King Ahab had walked into Micaiah’s knockout punch as unwittingly as the feminists had walked into Norman Mailer’s. To be sure, the king was no more inclined to accept Micaiah’s word than the feminists were to acquiesce to Mailer. But Ahab had been hoist by his own petard. He had asked for the word of the Lord and he had been given it, straight from the shoulder. At his own insistence, Ahab was confronted with a true prophecy that was now on public record as a counter to the false prophecies. Truth had spoken to power. Ahab could go forward and do what he wanted, presumably what he had intended to do all along. But from that moment on, he was without excuse, and it was his life that was at stake in the outcome of the prophet’s word from God.

**In Your Own Words, Your Majesty**

Consider another example from the prophets (1 Kings 20:26-43), this time an acted parable—another story on an earlier occasion when King Ahab found himself on the receiving end of a devastating punch line (the term is apt). This time he had been attacked by a massive and arrogant campaign launched against Samaria by King Ben-Hadad of Syria along with thirty-two allies (see 1 Kings 20:1). God had spared Israel mercifully, but with a rash complacency born of his own presumed brilliance in the victory, Ahab had spared his royal enemy after defeating his army. He was at once called to account by one of Israel’s band of prophets in a curious but dramatic episode.

The unnamed prophet assigned to be God’s messenger asked another prophet to strike him on the head and wound him. He then went to the road by which King Ahab was to return from the battle, and waited for him with a bloody bandage over his eyes, disguising who he was.

When the king passed by and inquired how he had been wounded, the prophet told him the following story. It was of course purely fictitious, but quite credible in the aftermath of the battle. In the heat of the fight, he said, someone had brought a prisoner to him and ordered him to guard the man with his life. If he were to let his captive escape, he would either forfeit his life or pay a steep ransom of a silver talent.

Unfortunately, the disguised prophet said, his captive did escape—to which Ahab broke in with his usual summary heartlessness: “So shall your judgment be. You yourself have decided it.”
Whereupon the prophet dramatically tore the bandage from his eyes and let the king see who he was: one of his own prophets. “Thus says the LORD,” the man of God declared, “Because you have let out of your hand the man I devoted to destruction, therefore your life shall be for his life and your people for his people.”

“In your own words, your majesty.” Ahab had judged himself. In full view of his noisy celebrating bodyguards and his sycophantic courtiers, he had once again been hoist by his own petard. The prophet’s judgment was far more effective than a tongue-lashing. The word of God had been acted out in public, and the king himself had chosen to enter in and play the role of his own prosecutor and judge.

Cross-centered and Cross-shaped

These stories are only two of many such examples scattered throughout the Bible, and, as we shall see, this approach was demonstrated most brilliantly of all by Jesus. There are obviously wider considerations behind their telling, and these we shall explore. But at their heart is a brilliant style of creative persuasion—one might say “prophetic persuasion”—and behind them a rich understanding of why such persuasion is needed and how it works. Together they represent a model of Christian persuasion that revives a way of persuasion that was powerful in the Bible and persistent down the Christian centuries, but largely forgotten today. For no one who reads the Bible carefully or who reflects on their own experience of seeking to share the gospel of Jesus today can avoid a blunt conclusion: There are all too many people who do not want to believe what we share or even to hear what we have to say, and our challenge is to help them to see it despite themselves.

This lost art of Christian persuasion stands in stark contrast to many Christian ways of communicating in the West today, ways that are prosaic, one-dimensional and ineffectual to a fault. More importantly, recovering the art of Christian persuasion helps us in two practical ways. First, it shows us a way out of the tragic impasse in which much contemporary Christian communication has been caught. When people are not interested in what we have to say, whether they are hostile, prejudiced, indifferent or blasé, we often find ourselves mute and at a loss. But at such moments there is a better way, so that there is no one anywhere and at any time to whom we cannot speak constructively. There is an important reason why such persuasion will not and should not always lead to success, but it is a style of raising issues that challenges people to be responsible to truth and to their own consciences, and therefore leaves them without excuse.

Second, this lost art challenges us to be more decisively Christian in our communication. Contrary to the impression many Christians give today, Christian communication is not a matter of communicating the Christian faith with whatever means we find handy and effective. “If it works, use it” is a naive contemporary approach that has already reduced much Christian speech to slick and smoothly delivered formulas or to garbled and mumbling impotence. By contrast, Christian communication is a communication of the gospel that is shaped by our understanding of God’s communication in Christ, just as God’s communication in Christ is shaped by God’s understanding of the condition of our hearts that God addresses in the gospel.

Put simply: As God saw, so he sent, and as God sent, so we share. As God saw our sin, so he sent his Son, and as God sent his Son, so we share our faith. To be truly Christ-centered, Christian persuasion is much more than just arguments about evidence or a battle over worldviews. There is an art to the advocacy of truth. It is an art that should be true to the truths of the Christian faith itself, and therefore shaped by both the Christian understanding of truth itself and by particular truths of the faith.

To say that does not mean, as some people argue today, that we simply preach the gospel and never seek to persuade. Proclamation and persuasion must never be separated. What it means is that Christian advocacy must always be independent. It must always be consistent to itself and shaped decisively by the great truths of the Scriptures, and in particular by five central truths of the faith—creation, the fall, the incarnation, the cross, and the Spirit of God.

True to the biblical understanding of creation, Christian persuasion must always take account of the human capacity for reason and the primacy of the human heart.

True to the understanding of the fall, Christian persuasion must always take account of the anatomy of an unbelieving mind in its denial of God.

True to the incarnation, Christian persuasion always has to be primarily person-to-person and face-to-face, and not argument to argument, formula to formula, media to media or methodology to methodology.
True to the cross of Jesus, Christian persuasion has to be cross-shaped in its manner just as it is cross-centered in its message—which as we shall see, lies behind the choice of the title of this book: *Fool's Talk*.

And true to the Holy Spirit, Christian persuasion must always know and show that the decisive power is not ours but God's. For God is his own lead counsel, his own best apologist, and the one who challenges the world to "set out your case." And as Jesus tells us, his Spirit, the Spirit of truth, is the one who does the essential work of convincing and convicting.

Can the good news of Jesus be defended by means that are completely independent of that good news and therefore neutral between believers and unbelievers? Should it? No. I will argue that there is no one we cannot talk to, however hostile to and distant from the gospel, but that this is precisely because we can count on the distinctive truths of the gospel itself—and therefore that our approach is independent in the sense of being decisively Christian and not neutral between belief and unbelief. This vision of Christian advocacy as "the art of Christian truth and of Christian truths" is the core of the lost art of persuasion we shall be exploring.

For the early Christian apologists in the time of the Roman Empire, the challenge was to introduce a message so novel that it was strange to its first hearers, and then to set out what the message meant for the classical age and its sophisticated and assured ways of thinking. For much of the advanced modern world today, in contrast, the challenge is to restate something so familiar that people know it so well that they do not know it, yet at the same time are convinced that they are tired of it.

In other words, our age in the Western world today is generally post-Christian rather than pre-Christian and pluralistic rather than secular, which creates important differences and is broadly more difficult to speak to. But generalities count for only a little when we talk to individuals. The context that is the challenge for Christian apologists will always differ from person to person, from age to age and from country to country. But for all of us in any age and in any part of the world, we are followers of Jesus, for whom knowing him and making him known is life's supreme joy. Christian persuasion is therefore an inexpressible privilege, a costly challenge and a demanding lesson well worth learning.