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Lee Strobel: We're on Cusp of Golden Era of Apologetics



(Photo: Lee Strobel)

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Christians should understand that being able to give reasons for their faith is not merely an option – it's biblically mandated, says apologetics author and speaker Lee Strobel.

To help Christians better explain and defend their faith, Strobel and ministry associate Mark Mittelberg have launched The Institute at Cherry Hills, an apologetics and evangelism ministry at Cherry Hills Community Church in Highlands Ranch, Colo. The institute is aimed at innovating new approaches to defending and sharing the faith.

Strobel and Mittelberg will kick off a series of national simulcasts to be hosted at churches starting in March with the event "The Questions Christians Hope No One Will Ask," based on Mittelberg's book by the same title.

While an atheist, Strobel began to write a book disproving the existence of Jesus and ended up realizing he could not. Instead, he ended up writing his best-selling book, *The Case for Christ: A Journalist's Personal Investigation of the Evidence for Jesus*. He has authored more than 20 books, including a series of other "Case for..." works, such as *The Case for Faith: A Journalist Investigates the Toughest Objections to Christianity*.

The Christian Post asked Strobel this week to discuss the current state of Christian apologetics via an email interview.

CP: What do you attribute the surge of interest in apologetics to right now?

Strobel: Christianity in general and the Bible in particular are under widespread and vociferous attack by militant atheists, radical scholars, critical authors, skeptical professors, misguided documentaries, and a proliferation of online spiritual confusion. Books by the so-called New Atheists have received a lot of media attention, which has emboldened cynics to become even

more outspoken. The Internet has helped atheists and agnostics coalesce as never before.
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Skeptics are becoming more determined to proselytize. In public high schools and colleges, the Secular Student Alliance, an umbrella for atheist organizations, has doubled in size in two years, with 250 chapters in the U.S. Not long ago, the American Humanist Association launched the largest national multi-media campaign ever by an atheist organization, preaching that the Bible advocates "fear, intolerance, hate, and ignorance."

And we're seeing the country drift toward skepticism. Among 18-to-29-year-olds, nearly one in four now claims no religion, which has doubled since 1990. Recent books have said that young people are dropping out of church at five or six times the historic rate, many because of intellectual doubts.

All of these trends have awakened a sleeping giant – Christian apologetics, or the defense of the faith. We're seeing apologetics books on the New York Times bestsellers list. Schools like Biola University and its Talbot School of Theology, which are leaders in apologetics, are filled to capacity. Denver Seminary is launching a new degree in Christian Apologetics and Ethics this fall. One organization is seeking to place apologists on 500 college campuses in the next five years.

A recent magazine featured this headline: "Apologetics Makes a Comeback Among Youth." As David Kinnaman wrote in his book *You Lost Me*, which is based on interviews with thousands of young people: "This generation wants and needs truth, not spiritual soft-serve. This is a generation hungry for substantive answers to life's biggest questions."

I agree! We were prodded to produce Student Editions of my books *The Case for Christ*, *The Case for Faith*, *The Case for a Creator* and *The Case for the Real Jesus* because so many young people were asking for them. There's a genuine desire among young people to understand the rationality behind Christian beliefs – often because their peers are reading atheist writings and raising questions about whether Christianity really does make sense.

Fortunately, I believe we're on the cusp of a golden era of apologetics. We're seeing such scholars as William Lane Craig, J. P. Moreland, William Dembski, Stephen Meyer, and others making fresh, cutting-edge arguments for Christianity. Academia is taking notice. Terrific websites, like apologetics315.com, are making apologetic material more widely available. Younger leaders like Sean McDowell are taking apologetics to a new generation.

Apologetics conferences are springing up all around the nation. We did one for high school students in Colorado a few years ago and we maxed out our facility with 2,000 enthusiastic kids. We had a waiting list to get in! The National Apologetics Conference has drawn up to 4,300 participants.

So I'm very optimistic about the future of Christian apologetics. Apologists are effectively refuting the recycled objections of the atheists while at the same time presenting a clear and compelling affirmative case for the truth of Christianity.

CP: How is apologetics changing right now?

Strobel: First, we're seeing more and more formal debates between Christians and skeptics on topics like the existence of God, the resurrection of Jesus, science and faith, Islam versus Christianity, and so forth. The foremost Christian debater, William Lane Craig, said that this "allows both sides to be heard on a level playing field and for the audience to make up their own minds about where they think the truth lies."

These debates have shown that Christians have an unfair advantage in the marketplace of ideas: we have truth on our side. When Craig debated Christopher Hitchens, one of the leading evangelists for atheism until his recent death, an atheist website evaluated the results by saying, "Frankly, Craig spanked Hitchens like a foolish child." Again, that was the atheist commentator's opinion!

In fact, the biggest problem for Craig has been that atheists are now afraid to debate him! The president of the British Humanist Association recently backed out of a debate, and top atheist Richard Dawkins has repeatedly refused to debate him, even though one of his fellow British atheists said this is "apt to be interpreted as cowardice on your part."

But there can be downsides to debates. Sometimes, they can push people into opposite corners, cement them into their own positions, and create more animosity than bridge-building. Still, there's definitely a place for them and I believe we'll see even more in the future.

Second, for the average Christian, the watchword in apologetics these days isn't "debate," but "dialogue." The reality is that very few Christians are qualified and skilled to do formal debates. I'm not, but I'm grateful for those who are – people like Bill Craig, Gary Habermas, J. P. Moreland, Michael Licona, Nabeel Qureshi, Dinesh D'Souza, John Lennox, and others.

For the rest of us, the trend is toward dialogue, discussion, and conversations. I call it "relational apologetics." This isn't your grandfather's apologetics, where we line up people against the wall and machine gun them with a barrage of facts. It's where we invite spiritually curious friends and neighbors into a safe environment where we can engage with them, listen, empathize, validate them as people, and help them get answers to the "spiritual sticking points" that are holding up their journey toward Christ.

Third, apologetics is becoming increasingly church-based. Many churches abandoned apologetics years ago, which is why we saw the birth of so many parachurch organizations. I thank God for these, but I do see a positive trend of apologetics coming back under the umbrella of the local church.

For instance, my ministry associate Mark Mittelberg and I have launched The Institute at Cherry Hills, an apologetics and evangelism ministry at Cherry Hills Community Church in Highlands Ranch, Colorado, to innovate new approaches to defending and sharing the faith. We're helping other churches by offering a series of national simulcasts that they can show live to their congregations, such as our upcoming Saturday morning, March 10 event on "The Questions Christians Hope No One Will Ask," based on Mittelberg's excellent book by that title. Churches and small groups can get more information at www.incastevents.com/questions.

Churches around the country are starting seminars and classes on apologetics. For example, Bill Craig teaches a Reasonable Faith class at his church in Georgia, and Jeremiah Johnson has started a Christian Thinker's Society at his church in Kansas, where he brings in scholars and interviews them. More and more churches are preaching Sunday series on tough questions about the faith. I think this is an extremely positive development. Apologetics has an important place in the local church as we seek to influence our communities for Christ in an increasingly skeptical culture.

Kinnaman has found, unfortunately, that one of the top six reasons that young people are leaving the church is because the church feels unfriendly to those who doubt. In other words, it's not a safe place to find answers to their challenging questions. We need to reverse that by creating churches where spiritually confused people are welcomed and where we patiently and lovingly help them in the process of finding answers to the issues that are hindering their faith.

Finally, we're seeing new formats for apologetics. For instance, there are creative websites like www.oneminuteapologist.com, which features pithy answers to common objections. Apologists are experimenting with Twitter, YouTube, and other social media. We're seeing forays into fiction, like my novel *The Ambition*, a legal thriller in which I present the realistic faith journeys of several people, including a cynical newspaper reporter. We're also seeing the production of creative documentaries. All of these innovations are important as we look for new avenues for apologists to define and defend the faith.

CP: What is trending in apologetics today?

Strobel: One of the big trends is small groups for spiritually curious people. These are safe gatherings where our friends, family members, neighbors, and others can have frank discussions about their questions and objections to Christianity. This is a terrific approach that resonates well in our culture.

Q Place, a ministry based in suburban Chicago (www.qplace.com), is breaking some new ground with these groups. Perhaps the country's leading expert is Garry Poole, author of the book *Seeker Small Groups*, who recently moved to Colorado to lead this initiative at our Institute at Cherry Hills. Garry is consulting with churches from coast to coast as pastors increasingly see the effectiveness of these groups.

The truth is that any Christian can be trained to lead what we call Spiritual Discovery Groups. You don't have to be the Bible Answer Person. Garry has developed training that teaches Christians how to ask the right questions, how to listen to others, and how to lead the non-believer down a path where the light bulb goes on and they come to understand their need for Christ. It's amazing! Up to 80 percent of non-Christians who join these groups and stay with them end up coming to faith in Christ.

Garry and I have coauthored several curricula that these groups can use, but many groups make up their own agenda. The leader asks participants, "If you could ask God any one question and knew he'd give you an answer, what would you ask?" The answers to that question then form the agenda for the group's meetings in the coming weeks.

Again, the leader doesn't just sit there and give answers; he or she fosters an atmosphere where everyone is free to offer their opinions and where the non-believers are guided toward discovering the truth of Christianity and their need for Jesus. Garry's training for this is simply terrific.

CP: What is most important for Christians to be aware of when it comes to apologetics?

Strobel: Christians should understand that being able to give reasons for our faith is not merely an option – it's biblically mandated. First Peter 3:15 tells all Christians, "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. Do this with gentleness and respect."

Jude 3 tells us to "contend earnestly for the faith once for all given over to the saints." Titus 1:9 makes it a requirement for church leaders to be able to "encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it." Paul said in 2 Corinthians 10:5: "We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ."

All Christians should be able to articulate reasons why they believe what they believe – not just for the sake of our spiritually confused friends, but also so that we ourselves will have a deeper and more confident faith.

I remember a scientist peppering me with strong objections to Christianity when I was a new Christian. Frankly, it sent me into "spiritual vertigo" – that sick sense of disorientation that we feel when someone challenges our beliefs in a way that we simply cannot answer.

Yet when I later researched the issues he had raised, I found powerful and persuasive answers – and I emerged with a faith that was even stronger as a result. Plus, this prepared me for when others would raise those same issues, as they have repeatedly through the years.

CP: How important is apologetics in the average Christian's life?

Strobel: We often fail to realize it, but many of us have a son or daughter, a parent or sibling, a neighbor or colleague who is just one question away from faith in Christ. There's a major obstacle, objection, or issue that has stymied them in their spiritual journey. We need to help them – whether they have only one question or a whole raft of them.

I remember when Mark Mittelberg and I were doing a question-and-answer forum at a church. A man stood and posed an objection to Christianity. It happened to be a topic that I had recently researched, so I was able to give him a thorough answer. As he sat down, I heard him say, partly to himself, partly to me, partly to the woman sitting next to him, and I think partly to the Lord: "That was the last barrier between me and God." And that night after the forum ended, he received Christ as his Lord and Savior. I was glad that I was prepared on that day!

But often when a friend or neighbor asks a difficult question, we don't have a compelling response at the tip of our tongue – and that's okay. It's perfectly permissible to say, "That's a great question, and frankly I don't have a great answer right now. But let's check it out together."

Then you can use various apologetics resources to help them find answers to their obstacle. For instance, my website, www.LeeStrobel.com, has hundreds of free video clips with experts talking about what Christians believe and why. And certainly there's no shortage of books and DVDs that you can use to help your friend.

To me, this is part of the adventure of personal evangelism. What's more exciting, more fulfilling, more satisfying, and more important than helping someone take steps forward in their journey toward Christ? Rather than let tough questions derail our efforts to reach our friends, we should use their questions as a springboard for further discussion and conversation, all with the aim of helping them get past the barriers that are keeping them from Christ.

As Paul put it in Colossians 4:5-6, "Live wisely among those who are not believers, and make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation be gracious and attractive so that you will have the right response for everyone."

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