

## A Practical Plan to Raise Up the Next Generation

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I grew up in a Christian home. I came to Christ at five and was baptized at six. My family was committed to the local church. My dad faithfully taught Sunday school, led small groups, and was even an elder. My mom was always involved in ministry as well. I grew up attending Sunday school, Royal Ambassadors, and Awana. As a teenager, I was the model youth group kid, a student leader in high school, and a ministry intern as a senior, even committing my life to full-time vocational ministry before I graduated.

Then I met Dr. David Lane.

It was my freshman year in college and the course was Philosophy 101. Dr. Lane systematically dismantled the Christianity I grew up with. In class. In front of everyone. And I was not ready. But why not? I had spent the first eighteen years of my life in the church. Wasn't that enough time to prepare me to engage the world for Christ?

Sadly, the majority of our Christian students aren't ready either. They're not prepared for the serious intellectual challenges awaiting them, let alone the barrage of moral challenges from an increasingly secular culture. It's a huge reason why we continue to hemorrhage youth from our churches.

Thank God I discovered apologetics amidst Professor Lane's intellectual assault on my Christianity. Apologetics helped rebuild my faith in Christ, and I became convinced of its absolute necessity for student discipleship. That's right, I said *necessity*. Apologetics is not optional in a post-Christian culture. It's not just for the nerdy youth group kid "who's into that kind of stuff." God is a rational God, and we are made in his image. Therefore, every student is rational by design, instinctively gathering reasons and evidence as they seek to make sense of the world around them and form a coherent set of beliefs about reality. As the church equips a new generation for the cause of Christ, we

must begin with the conviction apologetics is an indispensable tool.

Now, I'm under no false pretense that if we simply give students apologetics we'll automatically secure their faith in Christ for a lifetime. Human beings are not just thinking beings; we're emotional, experiential, and volitional as well. That's why 1 Peter 3:15 (NASB)—the apologist's theme verse—begins and ends with two very important phrases. Peter starts with this reminder: "But sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts." Apologetics should be done amidst a certain kind of life, one where we surrender more and more of ourselves to Christ. When we do this, he transforms us. A life transformed by Christ is the requisite context for making "a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you." Peter ends the verse with a picture of such an apologetic: it is gentle and respectful.

So while apologetic training is necessary in discipling the next generation, it is not sufficient alone in forming fully devoted followers of Jesus. However, this does not minimize its necessity. The mind plays a prominent role in our spiritual transformation—"be transformed by the renewing of your mind" (Romans 12:2 NASB)—and therefore, we ignore the minds of the next generation to our own peril.

Maybe you're already convinced but wondering, "How can we *effectively* equip a new generation with apologetics?" Let me share some ideas that are borne out of my own experience teaching students as a youth pastor for eleven years, as a parent for eighteen years (and counting!), and as Stand to Reason's Student Impact director for the last twelve years. I've made plenty of mistakes in all three roles, but my experience has allowed me to hone an approach that can be effective at home, at church, at youth group, or in a Christian school.

## Back to the Future

Before we look forward in the formation of the next generation, let us first take a look to the past. If we can lay aside what C.S. Lewis called chronological snobbery—"the uncritical acceptance of the intellectual climate common to our own age and the assumption that whatever has gone out of date is on that account discredited"<sup>1</sup>—we will discover long-forgotten insights to help forge a path forward. So for a moment, I want you to lay aside modern educational models and contemporary youth ministry approaches and programs and consider an ancient model.

As our oldest daughter approached the junior-high years, my wife and I began to rethink our views on educating and discipling our kids. We were dissatisfied with things we were seeing in her life, not only academically but spiritually and morally. In that process of reevaluation, we discovered an ancient approach to education called "classical education," stretching back to the Classical Greeks and Romans and formalized in the Middle Ages. Educator Susan Wise Bauer offers a concise description of this approach:

Classical education depends on a three-part process of training the mind. The early years of school are spent in absorbing facts, systematically laying the

foundations for advanced study [Grammar Stage]. In the middle grades, students learn to think through arguments [Logic Stage]. In the high school years, they learn to express themselves [Rhetoric Stage].<sup>2</sup>

While not an exhaustive definition, it gets us started and highlights the three-stage pattern of classical education called the *trivium*. In the early years of elementary school, called the Grammar Stage, children's minds are like sponges. There is a natural wonder at the world around them and a corresponding love of learning. Young children are primarily interested in the *what* questions. They want to know facts about the world, and they absorb and memorize them with ease.

Nearing the middle-school or junior-high years, a student's mind grows in its ability to analyze and think abstractly. During this phase, called the Logic Stage, students are asking the *why* questions. Many adults perceive such questioning to be a direct challenge to their authority, but often it's merely the outworking of our natural inclination to sort things out for ourselves. At this stage, students want to know if there are good reasons to believe the so-called facts they were given at younger ages and to see if those facts provide a coherent picture of the world.

As students approach high school and enter the Rhetoric Stage, they must grow in their ability to communicate. During this stage, students build on the first two stages by taking the *what* and the *why* and communicating what they've learned through writing and speaking. Research, writing papers, giving speeches, debating and the like force students to articulate what they've come to believe as true.

The medievals believed this *trivium* pattern corresponded to the universal human experience of learning. It accurately captures the manner in which young minds are best trained.<sup>3</sup> Thus, we should take this ancient approach to education and breathe into it new life for our modern context. Indeed, the *trivium* provides us with a three-stage approach to discipling the next generation:

Stage 1: Teach the *What*—Grammar Stage (primary focus of grades 0–4)

Stage 2: Teach the *Why*—Logic Stage (primary focus of grades 5–8)

Stage 3: Create Experiences—Rhetoric Stage (primary focus of grades 9–12)

Outlining a general approach is vital. First, it keeps us from getting lost in the details of training. Without the big picture, we may wander aimlessly, looking for the latest and greatest video series or searching for that one comprehensive curriculum package. Certainly individual tools are important, but we need to understand the larger strategy within which our tools fit and make sense. Second, it brings to light the requisite context for effective training. Apologetics is the *why*, but there must be an appropriate foundation of the *what* in place first for the *why* to secure it.

So first, we must be convinced of the necessity of apologetics, and second, we must have a larger discipleship framework in place into which we fit apologetics. Now we're ready to explore the practical how-tos.

## Stage 1: Teach the *What*

Before we can teach our students how to defend what we believe, they must know what it is we actually believe. They must first engage theology, the study of God. Apologetics is properly understood as a sub-branch of theology; theology is its foundation. When should theological training begin? As soon as our kids can speak.

From the youngest of ages, we need to teach children God's attributes, Trinitarian doctrine, the deity of Christ, the meaning of the cross, the nature of Scripture, the nature of man, and the nature of the church. Grab any standard systematic theology and its table of contents will give you an overview of theological topics to teach. Of course, we need to communicate theology in an age-appropriate manner, so a child's first exposure will be basic, but it will also be foundational. Just as learning language during the Grammar Stage of classical education provides the building blocks for all future learning, learning the language of theology builds a foundation for future training in apologetics. Here are three practical steps for this stage.

1. *Reading.* Read, read, read. I cannot emphasize this enough. Start by reading to them. Read children's Bibles, individual biblical stories, classical stories, and any Christian children's books you can get your hands on. Read to them at home, at church, and at school. Reading is an indispensable tool in teaching theology. It's no accident God gave us his Word in written form and not on a DVD.

2. *Catechism.* A catechism is simply a summary of Christian doctrine. It is generally laid out in question-answer format and is a fantastic tool to build a theological foundation in our kids. My wife and I are currently working our way through a children's version titled *First Catechism*<sup>4</sup> with our three-year-old son and seven-year-old daughter. We ask them a catechism question—"Who made you?"—and they memorize the answer—"God." I'm astonished at my three-year-old's ability to memorize large portions of information. By having our kids memorize the catechism, we are pouring into them the raw theological material we will build upon in later years. We also teach the two- and three-year-old class at our local church and are taking them through this catechism as well.

3. *Memorization.* Capitalize on your kids' capabilities by having them memorize significant theological pieces. In addition to the catechism, have them memorize important passages of Scripture and the great creeds of the church. Singing praise songs and hymns is a great way to memorize theological content as well. Here is a list of ten important items to have children memorize:

First Catechism

Apostles Creed

Nicene Creed

Attributes of God

Ten Commandments

Lord's Prayer

Psalm 23

The Beatitudes

The Great Commandment (Matthew 22:37-39)

The Great Commission (Matthew 28:19-20)

Sadly, this is where much of our Christian education stops. Whether it's children, youth, or adults, we just keep teaching the *what* and never equip our people with the *why*.

I recently role-played an atheist with a group of adults at a local church in Southern California. An older gentleman began to engage my atheist character, telling me he had been a Christian for more than thirty years. He then began his defense of Christianity with the "God-said-it-I-believe-it-that-settles-it" approach, stating emphatically that the Bible was the Word of God. I simply responded, "Why do you think the Bible is the Word of God?" Silence. He had no answer. He was stuck in the *what* and could not answer the *why*.

Laying the theological foundation in stage one is just the beginning. Now we must move on to the apologetic training of stage two.

## Stage 2: Teach the *Why*

Around fourth or fifth grade, a student's mind grows significantly in its capacity for abstract thought. Their ability to reason grows, and they move from merely the *what* questions to the *why* questions. Don't be surprised if they begin to question you and challenge your answers at this stage. And don't be threatened by it either. Instead, capitalize on it. They've reached the Logic Stage and are now ready for a good dose of apologetics.<sup>5</sup>

Here we need to give students arguments for God's existence, evidence for the resurrection of Jesus, and reasons why the Bible is not only historically reliable but also divinely inspired. In addition, we must help them overcome objections to Christianity, such as the problem of evil and suffering, moral relativism, religious pluralism, and challenges to the Bible. When we equip them with "the reason for the hope" we have in Christ, we help secure the theological foundation of stage one and strengthen their confidence that Christianity is objectively true. Here are three practical steps for this stage.

1. *Ask them questions first.* Don't wait for students to raise questions and challenges; be proactive and provoke their questions. Question the theological training you provided in stage one: "You believe God is all-powerful and all-loving, but how do you know he exists in the first place?" And then wait. Let them struggle to answer, and then question

their answers. Struggling can create some healthy internal motivation for our students to care about the questions and seek out satisfying answers.

2. *Never shut down their questions.* Create a safe space for students' doubts by allowing them to ask any and all questions. And when they ask, affirm them in their questioning. According to recent research by the Fuller Youth Institute, students who were free to express their doubts during high school showed greater faith maturity in college. <sup>6</sup> If you shut down their questions, they won't stop questioning, they'll just do it without you.

3. *Answer four key questions.* The case for Christianity is a cumulative one. That means there is no apologetic silver bullet, no single argument that establishes the entire case. Instead, we must help students identify the key components of our cumulative case and supply them with the supporting reasons and evidence. Have them answer these four key questions to establish the truthfulness of Christianity:

Does truth exist?

Does God exist?

Does God act (miracles)?

Does God speak (Scripture)? <sup>7</sup>

By the time a student graduates from our home or our ministry, she must move beyond merely *believing* the truth to actually *knowing* the truth. What's the difference? Philosophers generally define knowledge as justified true belief. If I know something, not only do I believe it to be true, but it's supported by adequate reasons. The theological training of stage one supplies the true beliefs of Christian orthodoxy and the apologetic training of stage two provides the reasons and justification. Together they furnish our students with knowledge of the truth.

### Stage 3: Teach the *How-to*

At the next stage, it's time to get the theological and apologetic training out of the classroom and into real life. The best way to learn something is to teach it to someone else, and the rhetoric stage forces students to do just that. Students must learn to take the *what* and the *why* of Christianity and communicate it in a coherent and reasonable manner. We need to create experiences in which students have the opportunity to articulate what they believe and why they believe it. Here are three practical examples.

1. *Role-play.* I love being invited to an unsuspecting youth group to role-play an atheist or Mormon. By dialoguing with my non-Christian character, students are forced to explain and defend their Christian views. Unfortunately, most Christian youth are ill-equipped to do so. What's worse is that they don't know how ill-equipped they are. After a thorough dismantling through role-play, students' eyes are opened and many are motivated to learn the *what* and the *why*. And over time, continued role-play can help

students hone their ability to articulate the truth.

2. *Invite guests.* Don't just role-play non-Christian characters with your students, invite the real thing. After teaching your students about the Trinitarian nature of God, invite Jehovah's Witnesses into your home or youth group to discuss the topic. Teach your students about the nature of salvation and invite Mormon missionaries over for a conversation on the matter. Once you've equipped your students with arguments for God's existence, ask your atheist neighbor to discuss the topic with them. When students are forced to have real-time conversations with real-life people, their learning increases exponentially.

3. *Visit another religious site.* As a youth pastor, I would teach my students about other religions. I knew they would eventually encounter a friendly Hindu neighbor, a kind Muslim classmate, or some other person who held opposing beliefs, and I wanted to expose them to those ideas first. My strategy was inoculation, not isolation. So after teaching about a religion like Buddhism and offering a biblical and philosophical critique, I would arrange a field trip to the local Buddhist temple. A monk gave us a tour, explained their basic beliefs and practices, and answered students' questions. Everything the students learned in the classroom prior to the field trip came to life as they engaged a Buddhist monk in the flesh. The encounter was exciting, and it gave students an opportunity to get the theology and apologetics out of the classroom and into a real conversation. Again, they were forced to articulate the truth, and in doing so, they learned the truth in a deeper and more meaningful way.

### Training Must Be Intentional

It's time to stop bemoaning the exodus of students from our churches and start doing something serious about it. The world is certainly serious about stripping students of their Christian faith. Atheists like Daniel Dennett say as much: "They will see me as just another liberal professor trying to cajole them out of some of their convictions, and they are dead right about that—that's what I am, and that's exactly what I am trying to do."<sup>8</sup> They're intentional out there in the world. We'd better get intentional here in the church.

This three-stage plan of training provides a practical strategy that can be implemented immediately. Take it and use it. Build on it and add your own ideas. But do not wait to start training up the next generation. Too much is at stake.

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