



Tactics

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CHAPTER ONE

DIPLOMACY OR D-DAY?

APOLOGETICS has a questionable reputation among non-aficionados. By definition, apologists *defend* the faith. They *defeat* false ideas. They *destroy* speculations raised up against the knowledge of God.

Those sound like fightin' words to many people: Circle the wagons. Hoist the drawbridge. Fix bayonets. Load weapons. Ready, aim, fire. It's not surprising, then, that believers and unbelievers alike associate apologetics with conflict. Defenders don't dialogue. They fight.

In addition to the image problem, apologists face another barrier. The truth is that effective persuasion in the twenty-first century requires more than having the right answers. It's too easy for postmoderns to ignore our facts, deny our claims, or simply yawn and walk away from the line we have drawn in the sand.

But sometimes they don't walk away. Instead, they stand and fight. We waded into battle only to face a barrage we can't handle. We have ignored one of the first rules of engagement: Never make a frontal assault on a superior force. Caught off balance, we tuck our tails between our legs and retreat — maybe for good.

I'd like to suggest a "more excellent way." Jesus said that when you find yourself as a sheep amidst wolves, be innocent, but shrewd (Matthew 10:16). Even though there is real warfare going on,¹ our engagements should look more like diplomacy than D-Day.

In this book I would like to teach you how to be diplomatic. I want to suggest a method I call the Ambassador Model. This approach trades more on friendly curiosity—a kind of relaxed diplomacy—than on confrontation.

Now I know that people have different emotional reactions to the idea of engaging others in controversial conversation. Some relish the encounter. Others are willing, but a bit nervous and uncertain. Still others try to avoid it entirely. What about you?

Wherever you find yourself on this scale, I want to help. If you're like a lot of people who pick up a book like this, you would like to make a difference for the kingdom, but you are not sure how to begin. I want to give you a game plan, a strategy to get involved in a way you never thought you could, yet with a tremendous margin of safety.

I am going to teach you how to navigate in conversations so that you stay in control—in a good way—even though your knowledge is limited. You may know nothing about answering challenges people raise against what you believe. You may even be a brand new Christian. It doesn't matter. I am going to introduce you to a handful of effective maneuvers—I call them tactics—that will help you stay in control.

Let me give you an example of what I mean.

THE WITCH IN WISCONSIN

Several years ago while on vacation at our family cabin in Wisconsin, my wife and I stopped at the one-hour photo in town. I noticed that the woman helping us had a large pentagram, a five-pointed star generally associated with the occult, dangling from her neck.

"Does that star have religious significance," I asked, pointing to the pendant, "or is it just jewelry?"

"Yes, it has religious significance," she answered. "The five points stand for earth, wind, fire, water, and spirit." Then she added, "I'm a pagan."

My wife, caught off guard by the woman's candor, couldn't suppress a laugh, then quickly apologized. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be rude. It's just that I have never heard anyone actually admit right out that they were pagan," she explained. She knew the term only as a pejorative used by her friends yelling at their kids: "Get in here, you bunch of pagans!"

"So you're Wiccan?" I continued.

She nodded. Yes, she was a witch. "It's an Earth religion," the woman explained, "like the Native Americans. We respect all life."

"If you respect all life," I said, "then I suppose you're pro-life on the abortion issue."

She shook her head. "No, actually I'm not. I'm pro-choice."

I was surprised. "Isn't that an unusual position for someone in Wicca to take, I mean, since you're committed to respecting all life?"

"You're right. It is odd," she admitted, then quickly qualified herself. "I know *I* could never do that. I mean, *I* could never kill a baby. I wouldn't do anything to hurt anyone else because it might come back on me."

Now this was a remarkable turn in the conversation for two reasons. First, notice the words she used to describe abortion. By her own admission, abortion was baby killing. The phrase wasn't a rhetorical flourish of mine; these were her own words. I did not have to persuade her that abortion took the life of an innocent human being. She already knew it.

She had just offered me a tremendous leg up in the discussion, and I was not going to turn it down. From then on I abandoned the word "abortion;" it would be "baby killing" instead.

Second, I thought it remarkable that her first reason for not hurting a defenseless child was self-interest — something bad might befall *her*. *Is that the best she could do?* I thought to myself. This comment itself was worth pursuing, but I ignored it and took a different tack.

"Well, maybe *you* wouldn't do anything to hurt a baby, but other people would," I countered. "Shouldn't we do something to stop *them* from killing babies?"

"I think women should have a choice," she countered without thinking.

Now, generally statements like "women should have a choice" are meaningless as they stand. Like the statement, "I have a right to take ...," the claim requires an object. Choose ... what? Take ... what? No one has an open-ended right to choose. People only have the right to choose particular things. Whether anyone has a right to choose depends entirely on what choice they have in mind.

In this case, though, there was no ambiguity. The woman had already identified the choice: baby killing, to use her words. Even though she personally respected all life, including human life, this was not a belief she was comfortable "forcing" on others. Women should still have the choice to kill their own babies. That was her view.

Of course, she did not put it in so many words. This was her view *implicitly*.

When bizarre ideas like these are obviously implied, do not let them lurk in the shadows. Drag them into the light with a request for clarification. That is exactly what I did next.

"Do you mean women should have the choice to kill their own babies?"

"Well..." She thought for a moment. "I think all things should be taken into consideration on this question."

"Okay, tell me: What kind of considerations would make it all right to kill a baby?"

"Incest," she answered quickly.

"Hmm. Let me see if I understand. Let's just say I had a two-year-old child standing next to me who had been conceived as a result of incest. On your view, it seems, I should have the liberty to kill her. Is that right?"

This last question stopped her in her tracks. The notion was clearly absurd. It was also clear that she was deeply committed to her pro-choice views. She had no snappy response and had to pause for a moment and think. Finally, she said, "I'd have mixed feelings about that." It was the best she could do.

Of course, she meant this as a concession, but it was a desperately weak response (“Killing a two-year-old? Gee, you got me on that one. I’ll have to think about it.”)

“I hope so,” was all I had the heart to say in response.

At this point I noticed a line of would-be customers forming behind me. Our conversation was now interfering with her work. It was time to abandon the pursuit. My wife and I finished our transaction, wished her well, and departed.

Beware when rhetoric becomes a substitute for substance. You always know that a person has a weak position when he tries to accomplish with the clever use of words what argument alone cannot do.

I want you to notice a few things about this short encounter. First, there was no tension, no anxiety, and no awkwardness in the exchange. There was no confrontation, no defensiveness, and no discomfort. The discussion flowed easily and naturally.

Second, even so, I was completely in control of the conversation. I did this by using three important tactics, maneuvers I will explain in greater detail later in the book, to probe the young woman’s ideas and begin to question her faulty thinking.

To start with, I asked seven specific questions. I used these questions to begin the conversation (“Does that star have religious significance or is it just jewelry?”) and to gain information from her (“So you’re Wiccan?”). I then used questions to expose what I thought were weaknesses in how she responded (“Do you mean women should have the choice to kill their own babies?”).

I also gently challenged the inconsistent and contradictory nature of her views. On the one hand, she was a witch who respected all life. On the other hand, she was pro-choice on abortion, a procedure she characterized as “killing babies.”

Finally, I tried to help her see the logical consequences of her beliefs. For her, incest was a legitimate reason to kill a baby. But