

# Why Evangelism Requires Both Logic and Loveliness

An apologist argues that beauty and imagination are key to faith formation.  
**HOLLY ORDWAY**



Image: Rob Birkbeck

**P**aradoxically, we live in an age of both unprecedented information access and widespread religious illiteracy. Never has there been more material available on the rational and historical grounds for Christian faith, yet our Western culture is becoming ever more secularized. Increasing numbers of people feel comfortable embracing agnosticism or atheism, and every day we see evidence of hostility to Christianity, especially on topics related to sexual ethics. How are we to approach evangelism and discipleship in this strange, new, “post-truth” world, with its ever-deepening cultural and political divisions?

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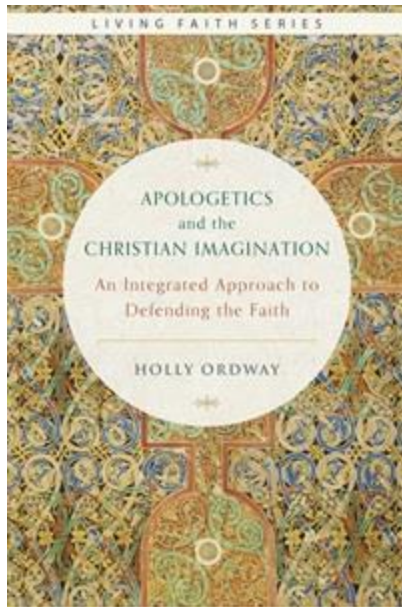
 

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The classic rational arguments for Christian faith—based on evidence, philosophy, and history—are as sound as ever, but they are effective *only* when people are interested in the questions and find our words and ideas meaningful. Today, we cannot count on our listeners to be either interested or informed. Here, we see the need for a new approach—or rather, the return to an older, more integrated approach to apologetics that engages the whole human person. Many contemporary apologists—myself included—look to both [reason and imagination](#) to help us lead people to know about, follow, and love our Lord Jesus Christ.

As an apologist, I appreciate the value of the imagination in no small part because of the role it played in helping me come to Christian faith. I was once an atheist, and a hostile one, who agreed with the [New Atheists](#) that Christianity was not just false but irrational and harmful.

Although I was not interested in apologetic arguments at the time, I had, without knowing it, been experiencing the work of grace through my imagination. As a child, I fell in love with the Chronicles of Narnia and *The Lord of the Rings*. At the time, of course, I didn't know that I was encountering God's grace through those books. Years later, as an atheist and graduate student, I wrote my doctoral dissertation on fantasy novels and had J. R. R. Tolkien's great essay "On Fairy-stories"—with its powerful statement of the *evangelium*, the Good News—at the heart of it. When I became a college professor, I was deeply moved and intrigued by the writings of Christian poets. In time I realized that the faith of these writers was more complex and more interesting than I had thought, and I decided to learn more.



Like C. S. Lewis, I had a two-step conversion. I came to belief in God but then struggled with the idea of the Incarnation. All the evidence pointed toward the Crucifixion and the Resurrection as historical facts, but I found that I was unable to *accept* the idea of Jesus as God incarnate. At that point, I turned very deliberately to the Chronicles of Narnia: I went looking for Aslan, the lion who is the great Christ-figure of the Chronicles. Through my experience of those stories, my imagination was able to connect with what my reason already knew, and I was able to *grasp* as a whole person that God could become incarnate. That imaginative experience removed the last stumbling block for my acceptance of Christ.



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Philosophical and historical [apologetics](#) played an important role in my conversion: I would not have been able to accept Christ if I had not become convinced that Christianity is indeed rational and true. However, for both Lewis and myself, imagination and reason were *both* necessary for conversion. It was thus a natural development for me—as a scholar and teacher—to study the role of imagination in apologetics.

[Imaginative apologetics](#) takes a range of forms, one of which involves the human experience of *longing*. We deeply desire and restlessly search for what is good, beautiful, and meaningful, even if we aren't quite sure exactly what we seek or where we can find it. We long for love, for connection, for meaning in our lives, and yet complete fulfillment is always just out of reach.

Lewis argues that this deep-seated unfulfilled longing is an indication that we are not merely material creatures. As he writes in *Mere Christianity*, “If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world.” The human desire for meaning and joy is never fully satisfied by material things and thus points toward a possible non-material dimension to the world.

However, as any thoughtful skeptic will point out, just because we desire meaning and eternal life does not *prove* anything, but it does suggest the possibility of these things existing and being accessible to us. Here again, imagination and reason work hand in hand. Although longing suggests the possibility of a transcendent good for which we were made, we must still use our reason to determine whether or not the possibility is true. The experience of longing, evoked through imaginative engagement, is not an argument in itself, but it can create a context in which apologetics arguments are *meaningful* and thus can prepare and encourage people to think seriously about rational arguments for Christianity.



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How, then, do we cultivate this “holy longing”?

Literature, music, and the visual arts may come readily to mind as modes of imaginative engagement, but it’s also worth considering an often overlooked form of apologetics: architecture.

The buildings in which we live, work, and worship both reflect what we believe and shape our lives. Traditional church architecture and imagery is a language developed over the centuries of the church’s life, varying in its dialect in different times and places, but with a common grammar of the sacred. Every bit of natural beauty comes from God’s hand; our own ability to see and respond to beauty comes from being made in his image. Responding to beauty in the here and now—the world that God made (and called good) —is a foretaste of how we will rejoice in the eternal, dynamic, unfading beauty of the redeemed creation.

Certainly, all the money used to build a church and make it beautiful could be given to the poor instead, but this would be a failure to see the full humanity of those we serve. Yes, we must meet the physical needs of the poor, but we must also help satisfy their hunger for beauty and meaning, nourishing heart and soul. The affluent and able-bodied often take for granted the ability to have beautiful things at home, or having the time, money, and transportation to attend concerts or visit museums. These experiences are out of reach of many people, but a church with open doors makes sacred beauty available to all, freely. Indeed, it is spiritually significant that a truly beautiful church is built and decorated in ways that are beyond the reach of any individual, whether rich or middle-class or poor. It can be a fruitful reminder to us all of our own genuine poverty of spirit. We all come to God with empty hands.

The fact that the beauty in a church is objective—available for the aesthetic appreciation of the atheist as much as for the believer—is part of its value for imaginative apologetics. *We* know to whom the beauty points; the skeptic may not yet follow us that far, but he can be drawn forward and invited to contemplation. The beauty offered by a church of traditional design (whether old or new in its construction), and the meaningfulness of its design and symbolism, are available for the skeptic to consider without the pressure of argument and decision. It is not necessary for the skeptic to know all the meaning of the symbolism in the church’s art and design. Some of it becomes apparent in the action of the liturgy and some of it is accessible by intuition. But the very existence of depths of meaning, beyond the surface, is itself a statement about our faith: That it is living, with more always available to discover; that in it we have discovered beauty that is ever ancient and ever new.



Architecture, art, music, and literature *invite* but do not *impose*. The skeptic is enabled to take a step inside, literally or figuratively, and to be involved in some way with this beauty. It may speak to the longings of his heart, or it may unsettle him and provoke him to questioning and wondering. If we have been able to offer real beauty, the one thing that we can say is that he will not leave the church, or close the book, entirely unchanged.

Of course, we must bear in mind that our Christian faith can never be reduced to a single knockout argument that will be convincing for all who hear it, or a single work of art that will be transformative for all who see it—nor should we wish for such a thing, for it would be tantamount to saying that we don’t need the Holy Spirit. It is the Holy Spirit who brings conviction. We plant and water; God gives the growth.

In the most basic sense, evangelization means saying like Andrew, Philip, or the Samaritan woman, “I have found the Lord; come with me, come and see for yourself” (John 1:40-41, 45-46, John 4:28-29). However, people need some sort of motive to answer that call to “come and see.” It might be simple curiosity. It might be the awakening of a longing for the divine. It might be respect for the person who extends the invitation. Regardless, there is always some sort of imaginative engagement with the idea, or at least the possibility, that there might be something worth seeing.

Imaginative engagement, through literature and the arts, is not a substitute for teaching about doctrine, but it helps us see what doctrine *means*—and to desire to learn more. We need both propositional argument and imaginative engagement, continually shaped and reshaped to show the truth in fresh ways. We must be attentive to help people see the beauty of the faith, to enter

into its wonder and joy, to see afresh, and to find the faith meaningful so that they may discover it to be true.

*This adapted excerpt from [Apologetics and the Christian Imagination: An Integrated Approach to Defending the Faith](#) by Holly Ordway has been published with permission from Emmaus Road Publishing. Ordway is professor of English and faculty in the [Master of Arts in Apologetics program](#) at Houston Baptist University and holds a PhD in English from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. She is the author of [Not God's Type: An Atheist Academic Lays Down Her Arms](#); her website is [hollyordway.com](#). Ordway was also featured in a Christianity Today cover story, "[Meet the Women Apologists](#)."*