

AN INTRODUCTION TO APOLOGETICS

It would be nice if all unbelievers were willing and eager to hear the gospel. It would be nice if all we had to do was tell them about Jesus, and they said something like, “Sounds good to me. Sign me up!” However, when we share the gospel, we will often have to prove that it is true, answer difficult questions, and gently show how the beliefs of the other person are not true. Telling the good news about Jesus is relatively easy if we have the opportunity. Trying to convince someone that this news is true and reasonable is another story. For this, we need to study apologetics. Evangelism and apologetics go hand in hand. That is why Mark Mittelberg calls apologetics “the handmaiden to evangelism.”¹

WHAT IS APOLOGETICS?

Apologetics has been around for as long as Christianity has existed. In order to understand what it is, we will turn to some theologians and apologists.

Some definitions of apologetics

The apologist and philosopher Douglas Groothuis provides the following definition: “Christian apologetics is the rational defense of the Christian worldview as objectively true, rationally compelling and existentially or subjectively engaging. The word *apologetics* comes from the Greek word *apologia*, which can be translated as ‘defense’ or ‘vindication.’”² That Greek word can be found in 1 Peter 3:15, the key verse to support apologetics: “but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense [*apologian*] to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect.”

The definition given by Groothuis says that we should be able to defend the Christian faith by showing that it is objectively true, grounded in logic and reason, and also “existentially or subjectively engaging,” which is to say that we should present the Christian faith as one that is appealing and that meets our human needs. Groothuis indicates, “Apologetics is linked to theology, philosophy and evangelism, but it is not reducible to any of these disciplines.”³ Apologetics touches on theology. If we are going to defend the gospel or show that it is true, we need to have a solid grasp on theology. Apologetics requires some knowledge of philosophy, at least some laws of logic. And apologetics supports evangelism, because the ultimate goal is persuading someone that Christianity is true so that he or she will believe in Jesus.

Another philosopher and apologist, William Lane Craig, gives us a similar definition. “What is apologetics? Apologetics (from the Greek *apologia*: a defense) is that branch of

¹ Mark Mittelberg, “An Apologetic for Apologetics,” in *Reasons for Faith*, ed. Norman L. Geisler and Chad V. Meister (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007), 18.

² Douglas Groothuis, *Christian Apologetics* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2011), 24.

³ *Ibid.*, 27.

Christian theology which seeks to provide rational justification for the truth claims of the Christian faith.”⁴ In other words, apologetics shows that our Christian faith is based on truth and reason. I would add that truth and reason come from God for, as John Frame observes, “every fact witnesses to the truth of God.”⁵

Apologetics concerns more than finding the truth upon which our faith is built. “In addition to serving, like the rest of theology in general, as an expression of loving God with all our minds, apologetics specifically serves to show to unbelievers the truth of the Christian faith, to confirm that faith to believers, and to reveal and explore the connections between Christian doctrine and other truths.”⁶ Here, Craig shows us that apologetics helps us love God with all our minds, it helps us show others that Christianity is true, it strengthens our faith, and it helps us see how Christian faith relates to truths found in other spheres of knowledge, such as history, science, and philosophy.

John Frame gives us a more broad definition of apologetics. He writes, “We may define it as the discipline that teaches Christians how to give a reason for their hope.”⁷ I appreciate Frame’s definition, because other definitions make it seem as though apologetics is only the defense of the faith. Frame believes that there are actually three aspects of apologetics.⁸

Apologetics offers proof that Christianity is true

The first aspect is providing proof or evidence that Christianity is true. The Bible does this, particularly in the New Testament. Near the end of his Gospel, John writes, “Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name” (John 20:30-31). John intended the book to demonstrate that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and God himself. Luke wrote his gospel for similar purposes (see Luke 1:1-4). In a similar way, when Paul writes of Jesus’ death and resurrection, he emphasizes the number of witnesses to the resurrection (1 Cor. 15:3-8). Paul is offering proof that Jesus is Lord.

There are many ways that we can provide a rational basis for faith in Christ. We can demonstrate that the Bible is the most trustworthy document of the ancient world. By offering proof of the Bible’s historicity (its historical authenticity) and accuracy, we can lead people to trust it as an accurate presentation of God, history, the human condition, and Jesus. (By faith, people will come to understand that the Bible is the very Word of God, though I don’t think it is reasonable to expect an unbeliever to view it as such.)

We can show that the resurrection of Jesus is an historical event. Many lines of evidence show that the resurrection is a true, historical event. We can also provide archaeological evidence for other events in biblical history.

⁴ William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 3rd ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008), 15.

⁵ John M. Frame, *Apologetics to the Glory of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1994), 14.

⁶ Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 15.

⁷ Frame, *Apologetics to the Glory of God*, 1.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 2-3.

There are also many arguments⁹ that point one toward God. We can argue that because there is universe, there must be a cause of the universe, and that cause is God. We can argue that because we have morals, there must be an objective and authoritative source of that morality and that source must be God. We can argue that God is the source of logic and reason. We can argue that he is the reason why we have an orderly universe that seems to be fine-tuned for human existence.

Apologetics defends the Christian faith

The second aspect of apologetics is the defense of the Christian faith. Paul praised the Philippians for their part in “the defense and confirmation of the gospel” (Phil. 1:7, 16). As Frame observes, “Much of Paul’s writing in the New Testament is apologetic in this sense.”¹⁰ He had to defend the gospel against Judaizers who insisted on circumcision and the observance of other Jewish rituals such as dietary laws. He told Timothy to guard his doctrine and to beware of false teaching. Unfortunately, Christians will always have to answer objections and defend the true faith from being distorted by false teachers.

Consider what Jude writes:

³ Beloved, although I was very eager to write to you about our common salvation, I found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints. ⁴ For certain people have crept in unnoticed who long ago were designated for this condemnation, ungodly people, who pervert the grace of our God into sensuality and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ. (Jude 3-4)

Because “certain people” crept into the congregation, Jude encourages them to “contend for the faith.” Commenting on this passage, Michael Green writes, “Jude uses the word *epagōnizesthai*, *contend*, in order to emphasize that the defense of this faith will be continuous, costly and agonizing; the cost of being unfashionable, the agony of seeking to express the faith in a way that is really comprehensible to contemporary man.”¹² They were to defend the gospel like soldiers, or strive for it like athletes competing in the arena.

Apologetics as offense

Apologetics can also have an offensive role. This does not mean that we intend to be offensive to people. Rather, we can present truths and reasoning to show that the beliefs of others (atheists as well as adherents of other religions) are not true. “God calls his people, not only to answer the objections of unbelievers, but also to go on the attack against falsehood.”¹³ In order to bring people to faith in Christ, we may need to show (with gentleness and respect) that

⁹ When I refer to “arguments,” I don’t mean to suggest that we fight or quarrel. An argument is a series of reasons, evidences, and/or facts that prove a point. To argue is to debate or demonstrate a reason for taking a certain position.

¹⁰ Frame, *Apologetics to the Glory of God*, 2.

¹² Michael Green, *2 Peter and Jude*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1987), 185.

¹³ Frame, *Apologetics to the Glory of God*, 2.

their beliefs are not founded on truth. Often, the inconsistencies of other worldviews can be revealed quite easily. When we show others that there is no intellectual reason for not believing in God—indeed, that not believing God is ultimately an anti-intellectual endeavor—we are bringing a biblical truth to the light: “The fool says in his heart, ‘There is no God’” (Ps. 14:1; 53:1).

According to Tim Chester and Steve Timmis, “The role of rational apologetics is to demonstrate that unbelief is a problem of the heart rather than a problem of the head. People may claim that the obstacle to faith is the problem of suffering or the implausibility of miracles or the existence of other religions. The role of rational apologetics is to show that these are not the real causes of unbelief. It is to strip away the excuses and expose rebellious hearts.”¹⁴ In a similar fashion, Groothuis writes, “Apologetics can be used to remove or diminish intellectual obstacles that hinder people from embracing Christ as Lord; thus it serves as pre-evangelism.”¹⁵

Some of this aspect of apologetics may sound harsh, but there is scriptural warrant for it. When writing to the Corinthians, Paul acknowledged his weakness and humility. However, he also indicated he wasn’t afraid to attack falsehood.

³ For though we walk in the flesh, we are not waging war according to the flesh.

⁴ For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds. ⁵ We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ, ⁶ being ready to punish every disobedience, when your obedience is complete. (2

Cor. 10:3-6)

What are the arguments and opinions raised against the knowledge of God? David Garland believes, “These bulwarks may therefore refer to the assortment of intellectual arguments that humans construct in an attempt to stave off the truth of the gospel.”¹⁶ Paul was ready not only to tear down such thoughts, but also to remove people from the church who held them. (This is what “punish every disobedience” means.)

I hope that we don’t have people in our church who hold views contrary to the truth of the gospel, but we all know other people who do. If we want to win them for Christ, we may need to reveal the weaknesses and lack of truth in their thinking before they will receive the gospel.

WHY DO WE NEED APOLOGETICS?

As I stated at the beginning of this section, it would be nice everyone were ready to hear and believe the gospel. But since that is not the case, we must defend the faith. Gone are the days of saying, “Because the Bible says so.” If people don’t believe that the Bible is God’s Word, or if they don’t even believe in God, such a statement will make no impact. (To be clear,

¹⁴ Tim Chester and Steve Timmis, *Total Church* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008), 172.

¹⁵ Groothuis, *Christian Apologetics*, 28.

¹⁶ David E. Garland, *2 Corinthians*, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1999), 436.

the Bible is objectively true and authoritative, and when we speak from the Bible to people, we are speaking truth. Without our reasoning, the Holy Spirit is able to demonstrate the truth of the Bible to people. But the Spirit may also use our “contending for the faith.”)

We have to come to grips with the fact that Christians make up the minority of people in this country. I would honestly be surprised if 10 percent of Americans were actually born again. Many people who claim to be Christians are biblically illiterate, as is our society as a whole. It is difficult to simply appeal to the Bible without offering some evidence as to why it should be regarded as authoritative.

In 2003, George Barna conducted a survey of self-proclaimed “born again Christians.” (I suspect that the vast majority of people who claim this title are not actually regenerate.) He reported that only 9 percent of these people possessed a biblical worldview, which was defined in this manner:

A biblical worldview was defined [for the purposes of this survey] as believing that absolute moral truths exist; that such truth is defined by the Bible; and firm belief in six specific religious views. Those views were that Jesus Christ lived a sinless life; God is the all-powerful and all-knowing Creator of the universe and He still rules it today; salvation is a gift from God and cannot be earned; Satan is real; a Christian has a responsibility to share their faith in Christ with other people; and the Bible is accurate in all of its teachings.¹⁷

Since we live in an environment in which biblical truth has been abandoned by many people, even by those who claim to be Christians, we must be ready to offer evidences of why the Bible is trustworthy. We must also be ready to use various forms of reasoning and argumentation to persuade people to believe in Christianity.

Apologetics aids evangelism

As stated earlier, apologetics is the handmaid to evangelism. They both have the ultimate goal of glorifying God by bringing people to faith in Jesus. When we share the gospel, we must be ready to give people a reason why they should believe it.

If you are like me, you have failed to share the gospel in the past because you didn’t know how to answer difficult questions that an unbeliever might ask. These questions could be about science and the origins of the universe, or about why there is evil in the world if God is good. A non-Christian may point out some potentially embarrassing things in the Old Testament, such as the arcane regulations in Leviticus or the destruction of other people groups. If we don’t know how to answer such questions, we may never share the gospel.

William Lane Craig believes that is the case.

Many Christians do not share their faith with unbelievers simply out of fear. They’re afraid that the non-Christian will ask them a question or raise an

¹⁷ “A Biblical Worldview Has a Radical Effect on a Person’s Life,” *Barna Group*, December 1, 2003, <http://www.barna.org/barna-update/article/5-barna-update/131-a-biblical-worldview-has-a-radical-effect-on-a-persons-life?q=biblical+worldview> (accessed March 7, 2012). Quoted in Groothuis, *Christian Apologetics*, 120.

objection that they can't answer. And so they choose to remain silent and thus hide their light under a bushel, in disobedience to Christ's command. Apologetics training is a tremendous boost to evangelism, for nothing inspires confidence and boldness more than knowing that one has good reasons for what one believes and good answers to the typical questions and objections that the unbeliever may raise. Sound training in apologetics is one of the keys to fearless evangelism. In this and many other ways apologetics helps to build up the body of Christ by strengthening individual believers.¹⁸

I believe that apologetics aids evangelism because it supports the gospel with evidence. But the best arguments alone cannot convert people to Christianity. Only the Holy Spirit can make someone a Christian. He may choose to use apologetics as the means of bringing someone to faith, but good reasoning and plenty of evidence alone will never save someone. Some have said, "You can't argue people to heaven." That may be true, but only in the sense that *we* can't save anyone, even by sharing the gospel. However, if God chooses to use our arguments and our gospel presentation to save someone, he is capable of doing so.

One more point related to evangelism: because Christianity has such little influence in our society, we may need to work harder to present the rationality of the Christian faith so that people will listen to us at all. Because many people consider Christianity foolish, we must demonstrate that it is logically consistent. In an earlier age in our country, we wouldn't have to work so hard to show that Christianity is an intellectually viable option, but we do now. As Craig puts it, "If the situation is not to degenerate further, it is imperative that we shape the intellectual climate of our nation in such a way that Christianity remains a live option for thinking men and women."¹⁹

Apologetics helps us engage the culture for Christ

We cannot control the results of our evangelism and apologetics. We can share the gospel accurately and lovingly and people may never believe. We can defend the gospel and give plenty of reasons why it is true, and still people may refuse to come to faith in Jesus. Those things are out of our hands.

However, Christians still need to engage the world with Christian values and a Christian worldview. If we are in the world arguing why abortion should be illegal, for example, we need to have a rational argument to show it is morally wrong. The same can be said for many other issues that arise in the public square. We will examine how we can give a rational argument for Christian values as we continue our study of apologetics.

Apologetics strengthens the faith of believers

During my first semester of seminary, I was fortunate enough to take an elective course titled, "History of the English Bible." I always wanted to know how the Bible came together and why we acknowledge it to be the Word of God. In that course, I learned that there are thousands

¹⁸ Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 21.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 17.

of manuscripts (hand-written copies) of the Greek New Testament, which is far, far more copies than of any other ancient book that we have. I heard the very convincing argument that the Bible has to be authored by God because it was written by many different human authors in different times and locations (and, in the case of the New Testament, *to* different locations), and yet it is remarkably coherent. As I read about these things, I found that my faith in God increased.

Apologetics can give us a similar benefit. Our faith is something that God has given to us (Eph. 2:8-9; Phil. 1:29). It is supernatural to believe in God, in that God must open up our hearts to believe in him. Though we believe in God by supernatural faith, there is still a logical, rational, evidential foundation to that faith. God actually created the universe. He truly became flesh and died on a cross. He really did rise from the grave. These objective truths undergird the Christian faith. In fact, one of the things that make Christianity different from some other religions is that it is based on objective historical facts, not subjective spiritual “realities.”

John Frame declares, “For the believer, apologetics gives reassurance to faith as it displays the rationality of Scripture itself. That rationality also gives to the believer an intellectual foundation, a basis for faith and a basis for making wise decisions in life.”²⁰ The Christian faith does not rest on blind faith. It is a faith that engages the mind, one that is reasonable and promotes a vibrant intellectual life.

When we are trained in apologetics, we are less likely to be “tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes” (Eph. 4:14). When we are grounded in truth, we will “See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ” (Col. 2:8).

Apologetics helps us prepare our children to face the world

Our world is dominated by secularism, a philosophy that denies God a voice at the table. Our public schools will allow nearly any philosophy or faith other than Christianity to be taught. The belief that science is the ultimate source of truth is a faith, as is the belief that there is no God. Any philosophy ultimately rests on faith assumptions, ideas that no human can prove empirically. We live in a time that is seeing increasing hostility towards Christianity. To those who are perishing in their unbelief, the cross is not only foolish: it is an offense.

No matter how we educate our children—public school, home school, Christian school—at some point, they will enter into a secular environment, most likely in college or the workplace. If they are not prepared to deal with attacks on their faith, they will have a difficult time. They will either be miserable, hide their faith by becoming “closeted Christians,” or will be separated from the world and therefore unable to evangelize.

Craig fears in particular for Christian children who enter public high schools and colleges.

In high school and college Christian teenagers are intellectually assaulted with every manner of non-Christian worldview coupled with an overwhelming

²⁰ Frame, *Apologetics to the Glory of God*, 26.

relativism. If parents are not intellectually engaged with their faith and do not have sound arguments for Christian theism and good answers to their children's questions, then we are in real danger of losing our youth. It's no longer enough to teach our children Bible stories; they need doctrine and apologetics. Frankly, I find it hard to understand how people today can risk parenthood without having studied apologetics.²¹

He then adds, "We've got to train our kids for war."

There are probably several other reasons why we should study apologetics. Personally, I find that that it strengthens my faith and gives me confidence to share the gospel. I also find it intellectually satisfying, as I see that all truth comes from God and is compatible with the message of the Bible.

IS APOLOGETICS BIBLICAL?

If you have read up to this point, the answer to this question should be obvious. Some of the more prominent verses in the Bible that support apologetics are 1 Peter 3:15; Jude 3; Philippians 1:6, 17; 2 Corinthians 10:3-6; and Colossians 4:6. However, these are not the only passages that encourage apologetics.

Throughout the Bible, there is a sense in which God is an apologist. He doesn't just say, "I'm God, so believe in me!" He accompanies his words with miraculous actions. Throughout the Bible, he proves his deity through numerous miraculous acts of power, which are often called "signs and wonders." Jesus showed his deity through miracles, the greatest of which was the resurrection. God doesn't merely assert facts about himself; he proves them with his actions.

Jesus was able to defend himself when the Pharisees, Sadducees, and scribes tried to test him. See, for example, Matthew 16:1-4, when the Pharisees and Sadducees come to test Jesus by asking him for a sign from heaven. Consider Matthew 22:15, when the Pharisees plot "how to entangle him in his words." Jesus gives them a brilliant answer about paying taxes, one which teaches a powerful truth about God's sovereignty over all powers, including Caesar (Matt. 22:16-23). In the passage that immediately follows, Jesus answers the Sadducees' question about marriage in a way that astonishes them (Matt. 22:23-33).

Paul was also a master apologist. Consider the following passages from Acts:

² And Paul went in, as was his custom, and on three Sabbath days he *reasoned* with them from the Scriptures, ³ *explaining and proving* that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead, and saying, "This Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ." ⁴ And some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a great many of the devout Greeks and not a few of the leading women. (Acts 17:2-4)

²¹ Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 19.

¹⁶ Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols. ¹⁷ So he *reasoned* in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there. (Acts 17:16-17)

And he *reasoned* in the synagogue every Sabbath, and tried to persuade Jews and Greeks. (Acts 18:4)

And they came to Ephesus, and he left them there, but he himself went into the synagogue and *reasoned* with the Jews. (Acts 18:19)

⁸ And he entered the synagogue and for three months spoke boldly, *reasoning and persuading* them about the kingdom of God. ⁹ But when some became stubborn and continued in unbelief, speaking evil of the Way before the congregation, he withdrew from them and took the disciples with him, *reasoning* daily in the hall of Tyrannus. ¹⁰ This continued for two years, so that all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks. (Acts 19:8-10)

And as he *reasoned* about righteousness and self-control and the coming judgment, Felix was alarmed and said, “Go away for the present. When I get an opportunity I will summon you.” (Acts 24:25)

When Paul was reasoning in those passages, he was usually doing so with other Jews. Since their basis of knowledge was the Old Testament, Paul reasoned from the pages of Scripture that Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of David and Son of Man that they had been awaiting. In Athens, however, Paul had to reason with the Greeks in a different way. He used an altar to an idol, “the unknown god,” as a starting point before talking about the true God who made everything, including nations and their inhabitants (Acts 17:22-27).

Paul then quoted a couple of Greek poets, showing that all truth is God’s truth, even when it comes from unlikely sources (Acts 17:28). He then used that truth (that all human beings are, in a broad sense, “God’s offspring”) to show that the real God must be a personal being, not a hunk of gold or silver or stone, made by a man (Acts 17:29).

Paul followed this information with a warning that the “times of ignorance” are now over, and that God calls people to repent, because one day he will judge the world through Jesus, who is risen from the dead (Acts 17:30-31).

When we discuss apologetic methods, we will consider the two ways that Paul reasoned with people (from Scripture and by using various evidences and arguments).

Paul also commanded Timothy to use apologetics. He told him that “the Lord’s servant” must be “able to teach, patiently enduring evil, correcting his opponents with gentleness. God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth, and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, after being captured by him to do his will” (2 Tim. 2:24-26).

Now that we know what apologetics is and why we are supposed to study it, we will begin to look at various methods for giving people the reason for the hope that is in us.