

An Introduction to Christian Apologetics

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What is 'apologetics'?

The term 'apologetics' derives from the Greek word *apologia*. Although it is derived from the same word as the English noun 'apology' and adjective 'apologetic' the meaning is quite significantly different. In the ancient Greek world an *apologia* was a legal defence of oneself, similar to the speech a modern-day defence lawyer makes on behalf of their client. It did not mean "a regretful acknowledgement of an offence or failure" (the Oxford English Dictionary definition of 'apology') but a carefully reasoned defence of one's beliefs or actions.

We might, then, define Christian apologetics as follows:

The task of developing and sharing arguments for the truth and rationality of Christianity and the falsehood and irrationality of alternatives with the aim of strengthening the faith of believers and provoking non-believers to consider Christ

The significance of this definition will become clearer throughout this article, but at this point it is important to emphasise that 'argument' in this context refers to a logical, reasoned case rather than an argumentative style. Apologetics includes both developing and sharing arguments – it is not a purely academic exercise conducted in an ivory tower, but a practical engagement with real people and real problems. You will also notice that there are two sides to the arguments we seek to develop – a positive case for Christianity and a negative case against alternative belief systems. Furthermore, the ultimate aims of apologetics are not to develop clever arguments but to see people led to faith and strengthened in their faith.

What are the origins of apologetics?

In the second century AD, as Christianity began to engage at an intellectual level with Greek philosophy and attracted greater attention from Roman society, a number of writers produced reasoned defences of the Christian faith. Of these Justin Martyr (c. 100-165 AD), a gentile from Samaria who was converted after seeking truth in numerous philosophies and eventually died as a martyr in Rome, is probably the best known and the most significant. These writers are generally referred to as 'the apologists'. Their writings collectively show three major concerns:

- To defend Christianity against false accusations (e.g. that Christians were atheists, sexually immoral or cannibals)
- To argue for the truth of Christianity on the basis that it fulfilled Old Testament prophecy
- To show that Christianity was superior to or fulfilled Greek philosophical ideas

Other eminent Christians of this period were disparaging of the approach of the apologists. For example, Tertullian criticised Justin's use of Greek philosophy, saying famously, "What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?" This difference of opinion continues to divide evangelical Christians today. Some have a positive approach towards apologetics, believing that all truth is God's truth and that it is important to defend

Christianity in the realm of philosophical debate, whereas others are suspicious of apologetics and argue that we should put our energies into proclaiming the gospel instead.

Interestingly, all three of the main lines of argument advanced by the apologists of the second century find precedents in the New Testament book of Acts, making Luke (or perhaps Paul, whose words he recorded) the first recorded Christian apologist. Renowned biblical scholar F.F. Bruce wrote:¹

Of three main types of Christian apologetic in the second century Luke provides first-century prototypes: apologetic in relation to pagan religion (Christianity is true; paganism is false); apologetic in relation to Judaism (Christianity represents the fulfillment of true Judaism); apologetic in relation to the political authorities (Christianity is innocent of any offence against Roman law).

So, then, apologetics originated in the New Testament (see the later section on *A biblical case for the task of apologetics*), developing further in the second century in response to challenges encountered as it crossed cultural boundaries into the Graeco-Roman world. Throughout the history of Christianity apologetics has continued to adapt to new cultural challenges. For a short overview of the history of Christian apologetics, including profiles of the leading figures in the development of modern apologetics, the reader is referred to the online article *A Brief History of Apologetics* by Kenneth D. Boa and Robert M. Bowman.²

What is the purpose of apologetics?

Apologetics is generally said to have three functions, although it should be realised that not all Christian apologists accept that all three functions are valid (some would say that we should not try to construct positive arguments for Christian faith but simply focus on refuting accusations against it) and there is considerable variation between different schools of apologetics as to what arguments should be used within each function:

- 1) Arguments for the truth of the Christian faith** (vindication / proof / positive apologetics)
Aim – to show that Christianity is reasonable / rational. Using philosophical arguments and evidence from science, archaeology and history to show that the Christian faith has greater power than any alternative belief system to explain and interpret the world we live in.
- 2) Arguments refuting accusations made against the Christian faith** (defence / negative apologetics)
Aim – to show that Christianity is not unreasonable / irrational. Removing objections that are made against Christianity, for example claims of contradictions in the Bible, alternative interpretations of historical and scientific evidence and misconceptions about Christian belief.
- 3) Refutation of opposing beliefs** (offense)
Aim – to show that non-Christian belief systems are unreasonable / irrational. Focuses not on specific attacks against Christianity but on undermining the foundations of other belief systems.

Some writers add a fourth function, namely persuasion. They claim that apologetics also aims to persuade people to believe in the Christian message. It is probably better to see the task of persuasion as the overarching aim of apologetics, with the three functions above playing different parts within it. This is a helpful reminder of the fact that apologetics alone is not enough – evangelism is also necessary.

¹ F.F. Bruce 'Paul's Apologetic and the Purpose of Acts', *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library* (1987) 89:2, pp.389-90

² Available at <http://bible.org/seriespage/brief-history-apologetics> (accessed 6th April 2021)

Another way to think about the purpose of apologetics is to think about how it relates to those who are believers and those who are non-believers. Apologetics aims both to strengthen the faith of the faithful and to remove obstacles to faith for those who do not believe.

How does apologetics relate to evangelism?

‘Evangelism’ is generally understood to mean sharing the good news message (gospel) about Jesus Christ. Apologetics is best seen as either pre-evangelism or as part of the process of evangelism. It removes barriers to belief and prepares the ground for the seed of the gospel to be sown. It is vital not to divorce apologetics strictly from evangelism. It is unlikely that people who have intellectual objections to the existence of God or the historicity of Jesus will receive the gospel message, and apologetics will help to remove these obstacles by appealing to intellectual reasoning. At the same time, a person could be intellectually convinced of the credibility and even the truth of the Christian faith but still not be a Christian. The gospel appeals not only to the mind, it also appeals to the emotions and, most importantly of all, to the will. Conversion occurs when mind, heart and will are surrendered to God in repentance and faith. As such it will often be wise to share the gospel as we engage in apologetic arguments.

Approaches to apologetics

There are numerous different ways to approach the task of apologetics and it is not always easy to classify different approaches. No one scheme of classification gains universal support. Two possible ways of classifying common approaches are:

a) Depending on the approach to knowing truth about God (i.e., religious epistemologies)

Can truth about God be discovered through human reason in response to observations about the world (empiricism), through a critical appraisal of the inherent logic of different belief systems (rationalism), through Scripture alone (Biblical authoritarianism), through personal experience (mysticism), or through a combination of these means? The debate over these different means of discovering truth about God depends on our belief about:

- *God* – is greater stress placed on His transcendence (the fact that He is beyond our knowing) or His immanence (the fact that He has revealed Himself to us and can be known).
- *Sin* – how has sin affected the ability of humans to apprehend truth about God (the effects of sin on the mind are called the *noetic effects of sin*).

Differing emphases on God’s transcendence and the noetic effects of sin lead to three distinct starting points for apologetics, as the following table shows:

Transcendence of God	Noetic effects of sin	Starting point for apologetics	Historic examples	How can God be known?
Strong emphasis on both		The unique Christian experience of grace	Blaise Pascal; Søren Kierkegaard; Emil Brunner	Faith
Less strongly emphasised		Proofs from nature and historic evidences	Thomas Aquinas; Joseph Butler; Dominic Tennant	Reason
Less strongly emphasised	Strongly emphasised	Scripture (God’s revelation)	Augustine of Hippo; Jean Calvin; Abraham Kuyper	Faith and reason

b) Depending on the way arguments are constructed

Steven B. Cowan argues for a more practical classification of apologetic methods on the basis of “*distinctive ways of presenting the case for Christianity, distinctive types or structures of argument.*”³ He identifies five approaches:

- 1) **Classical method** (e.g. William Lane Craig, R.C. Sproul, Norman Geisler, Stephen T. Davis, Richard Swinburne) Aims to establish theism through arguments from nature then to present evidences to prove that Christianity is the correct version of theism. Most proponents of this method claim that there is no point presenting arguments from historical evidence until the person has embraced a theistic worldview as they will always interpret them based on their own worldview
- 2) **Evidential method** (e.g. Gary R. Habermas, John W. Montgomery, Clark Pinnock, Wolfhart Pannenberg) Uses both historical and philosophical arguments but focuses primarily on historical and other evidence for the truth of Christianity. Will argue at the same time both for theism in general and Christianity in particular.
- 3) **Cumulative case method** (e.g. Paul D. Feinberg, Basil Mitchell, C.S. Lewis, C. Stephen Evans) Rather than approaching the task as a formal logical argument, sees the case for Christianity as more like the brief a lawyer makes in a law court – an informal argument drawing together evidence that together makes a compelling case with which no other hypothesis can compete.
- 4) **Presuppositional method** (e.g. John M. Frame, Cornelius Van Til, Gordon Clark, Greg Bahnsen, Francis Schaeffer) Emphasises the noetic effects of sin to the degree that believers and unbelievers will not share enough common ground for the preceding three methods to accomplish their goal. The apologist must presuppose the truth of Christianity as the proper starting point for apologetics. All experience is interpreted and all truth known through the Christian revelation in the Scriptures.
- 5) **Reformed epistemology method** (e.g. Kelly James Clark, Alvin Plantinga, Nicholas Wolterstorff, George Mavrodes, William Alston) Argues that people believe many things without evidence and that this is perfectly reasonable. Although positive arguments in defence of Christianity are not necessarily wrong, belief in God does not need the support of evidence or argument to be rational. The focus, therefore, tends to be more on negative apologetics, defending against challenges to theistic belief.

The book Cowan edited, entitled *Five Views on Apologetics* (Zondervan, 2000) contains chapters by proponents of each of these five approaches as well as responses to each chapter by the other four contributors. It is a helpful, although fairly technical, attempt to show the commonalities and differences between different approaches.

A third way: four methodologies

I find Cowan’s categories very helpful, but I prefer a four-way categorisation of approaches that is used by Kenneth D. Boa and Robert M Bowman, which combines both the epistemology and the approach to constructing arguments. The four methodologies they identify are Classical apologetics, Evidential apologetics, Reformed apologetics and Fideism.

It should be obvious that three of these four approaches are identical to three of Cowan’s: classical, evidential, and Reformed. Cowan’s ‘cumulative case method’ is a distinct approach to formulating arguments but since it draws together insights from the classical and evidential methods it is not strictly a distinct approach to apologetics. Cowan’s presuppositional method is largely subsumed under Reformed apologetics in this four-fold scheme (a careful reading of the descriptions above will show that they have much in common). The fourth approach in the Boa and Bowman scheme, which is not covered in Cowan’s classification although it shares ground with some people Cowan would class as ‘presuppositionalists’, is Fideism. This position

³ S.B. Cowan ‘Introduction’ in *Five Views on Apologetics* (Zondervan, 2000), p.14

correlates to the first line of the table of religious epistemologies, as it identifies faith as the sole way to know God and appeals to the Christian experience of God's grace as the only appropriate basis for apologetics.

The following table, adapted from Boa and Bowman, details the characteristics of these four approaches to apologetics and the way they tend to deal with some of the most common apologetics issues:⁴

	Classical	Evidential	Reformed	Fideist
Basis	Reason	Fact	Revelation	Faith
Form	Rational	Empirical	Transcendental	Paradoxical
Precursors	Anselm; Aquinas	William Paley	Calvin; Thomas Reid	Luther; Kierkegaard
C 20th advocates	C. S. Lewis; Norman Geisler	J. W. Montgomery; Richard Swinburne	Cornelius Van Til; Alvin Plantinga	Karl Barth; Donald Bloesch
Popular with	Catholics; evangelicals	Arminians	Calvinists	Lutherans; neoevangelicals
Knowledge	Internal coherence – use reason to judge between truth claims	External coherence – arrive at truth by discovering and interpreting facts	Fidelity to Scripture – God as revealed in Scripture is foundational for all knowledge	Fidelity to Christ – truth about God is found in encounter with Him, not in thinking about Him
Faith	Faith is reasonable	Faith is not unreasonable	Unbelief is unreasonable	Not known by reason alone
Philosophy	Apologetics uses philosophy's ideas	Apologetics uses philosophy's tools	Apologetics confronts false philosophy	Apologetics confronts all philosophy
History	Right view of history requires right worldview (objectivity difficult)	Right view of history requires right method (objectivity possible)	Right view of history based on revelation (objective truth found in Scripture)	Faith cannot be based on historical knowledge
Science	Consistency model: Science, properly interpreted, is consistent with the Christian faith	Confirmation model: Science gives factual confirmation of the Christian faith	Conflict model: True science depends on the truth of God's revelation	Contrast model: Science deals with physical matters; faith deals with the personal
Creation / evolution	Typically generic creationism	Typically old-earth creationism	Typically young-earth creationism	Typically theistic evolutionism
Experience	Religious experience not irrational – test experiences by worldview	Religious experience may not be reliable – test experiences by facts	God's image in man is point of contact – test experiences by Scripture	Experience faith, don't defend it – experience of faith is self-validating
Order of arguments	1. Theism; 2. Christ; 3. Scripture as attested by Christ	1. Historicity of Scripture; 2. Christ and theism; 3. inspiration	1. Scripture's divine claims; 2. Irrationality of all alternatives	First and always, Scripture as witness to Christ
Scripture	Scripture is subject of apologetics – rationally verified authority of God Fulfilled prophecy proves inspiration if God exists	Scripture is source of apologetics – factually verified story about Christ Fulfilled prophecy proves inspiration, therefore God exists	Scripture is standard of apologetics – self-attesting authority of God Fulfilled prophecy presupposes inspiration	Scripture is story of apologetics – self-attesting story about Christ Fulfilled prophecy is God's advance witness to Christ

⁴ Table adapted from <http://bible.org/seriespage/speaking-truth-love-perspectives-apologetics> (accessed 6th April 2021)

Religions	Disprove the worldviews underlying other religions	Present the unique factual, miraculous character of the Christian religion	Present the antithesis between Christian and non-Christian principles	Explain that the Christian faith is not a religion, but a relationship
God	Show that theism is the only or most rational worldview – cosmological and moral arguments are most common	Use various lines of argument and evidence to build a case for theism – design argument is most common	Show that God's existence is basic or foundational to all knowledge & proof – epistemic argument is most common	Explain that knowing God is a relational matter – all direct proofs are rejected; argument from paradox is used
Evil	Deductive problem: Is theism inconsistent? Freewill defence: evil results from human choice	Inductive problem: Is theism likely? Natural theology defence: evidence for God holds up	Theological problem: Is God sovereign over evil? Compatibilist defence: God did not directly cause	Existential problem: Can God still be trusted? God shows his goodness in Christ and His cross
Miracles	Miracles are possible – they are credible in a theistic worldview as part of special revelation	Specific miracles are probable – they provide evidence for theism in the context of biblical history	Biblical miracles are prophetic – they are credible to those who accept the Bible's authority	Christ's miracles are paradoxical – miracles, external and internal, given by God in response to faith
Jesus	Examine alternative views of Jesus to show that none can be rationally held	Detail evidence for Jesus' resurrection, fulfilled prophecies, etc.	Present Jesus' claim to be God as his self-attesting Word confirmed by Spirit	Call people to meet God's love in Jesus, the One no human could invent

In practice it is not always easy to place apologists neatly into any one methodology as many use different approaches depending on the question at hand. It is probably best to see these approaches as tools in a toolkit or weapons in an armoury. We can freely draw on different approaches depending on the situation in which we find ourselves. We will return to this idea in the section entitled *The dynamic of apologetic dialogue*.

Common objections to the task of apologetics

Christians who are sceptical about the value of apologetics raise a number of different objections, some based on verses from the Bible and others based on limitations of logic and apologetics. These objections are generally based on misunderstandings of the Bible text or of the purpose of apologetics. In the list of objections that follows I am indebted to Norman Geisler⁵ although I have made some changes to his list and have significantly modified his responses:

A] Objections from the Bible

1. The Bible does not need to be defended

Verses such as Hebrews 4:12 are quoted to support the claim that the Bible is powerful in itself since it is God's living word. It is sometimes said that the Bible is like a lion – it does not need to be defended but unleashed. It is true that Scripture is powerful to change attitudes and challenge hearts, but if someone will not read or listen seriously to it then it cannot do this work. Apologetics can establish the fact that it is reasonable to take the Bible seriously, so opening people to be prepared to listen. Furthermore, if Scripture only needed to be unleashed to do its work then the task of teaching and preaching would also be unnecessary and evangelism

⁵ Article at <http://www.bethinking.org/what-is-apologetics/intermediate/the-need-for-apologetics.htm> (accessed 15/3/11)

would be reduced to merely passing on texts from the Bible. Scripture consistently describes people as the medium through which God's truth is communicated to other people. The Bible, and the gospel which it declares, is powerful to change attitudes and lives, but it must be proclaimed, declared and explained for, "How ... can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?" (Romans 10:14).

2. God cannot be known by human reason

1 Corinthians 1:21 says that the world did not know God through its wisdom. It is claimed that this means there is no point in trying to get people to accept rational arguments for God. The context of 1 Corinthians 1, however, is not the existence of God but the acceptance of the message of the cross. That message cannot be accepted by natural reason alone – it only makes sense because of the special revelation of Scripture and as the Spirit enlightens (1 Corinthians 2:14). Elsewhere, however, Paul writes of evidence in nature pointing to the existence of God and some of His attributes, leaving people without excuse (Romans 2:12-15).

3. Natural humanity cannot understand God's truth

1 Corinthians 2:14 says that "The man without the Spirit does not accept the things what come from the Spirit of God". It is argued that there is no point, therefore, in trying to explain them to him. Notice, however, that Paul says this man **does not** accept (Greek *dekomai*, 'welcome') them, not that he **cannot** understand them. Non-believers reject the gospel not because it is illogical and they cannot understand what it means but because they refuse to accept its claims over them. Apologetics seeks to explain the message clearly and rationally so that when the Spirit moves the person's heart they will be ready to accept the truth. In fact, a prayerful approach to apologetics recognises that the work of the Spirit is necessary for people to receive the truth. The apologist does not seek to obstruct or replace the Spirit but to be the Spirit's agent in bringing people to Christ.

4. Without faith one cannot please God

Hebrews 11:6 clearly states that faith is essential to please God, and some people suggest that this means that reason is displeasing to Him. This claim sets up a false division between faith and reason. Biblical faith is not blind belief in spite of the evidence, but trust in something that has been commended to the person as trustworthy. The gospel is a message from God that claims that He can be trusted, and apologetics provides evidence that supports that claim. Faith is a response on the part of the individual that accepts the claim (or, rather, accepts the one of whom it speaks) and places confidence in it (or, more correctly, in Him) rather than in self or any alternative.

5. Jesus refused to give signs to evil men

This claim arises from Matthew 12:39, where Jesus says that a wicked generation asks for signs. However, in the next verse Jesus says that one sign, the sign of Jonah, meaning His resurrection, would be given. Jesus presented His miracles as evidence of His identity as the Messiah and Son of God (Matthew 11:4-5; Mark 2:10-11; John 14:11). On occasions He refused to do miracles for entertainment (Luke 23:8) or because of unbelief (Matthew 13:58), but people saw his miracles and realised that they showed He came from God (John 3:2), and the apostles pointed to His miracles (Acts 2:22) and especially His resurrection (Acts 2:32; Romans 1:4; 1 Corinthians 15:3ff.) as evidence of His identity. The proper lesson to learn from Jesus' example is not that apologetics is wrong, but that we need discernment to know when to engage in an argument and when not to.

6. Do not answer a fool according to his folly

Proverbs 26:5 is the basis for this claim, but those who make it neglect to read the following verse, which says that we **should** answer a fool according to his folly. The point of these adjacent and seemingly contradictory

proverbs is that we need wisdom to decide when we should give an answer to a “fool” (someone who rejects God’s existence, according to Psalm 14:1) and when we should not.

7. Apologetics is not used in the Bible

If this claim is meant to say that Scripture provides no examples of God providing evidence to support faith then it is simply wrong. Geisler points to the miracles of Moses (Exodus 4:1-9), Elijah (1 Kings 18) and Jesus (Acts 2:22) as well as the way in which Paul reasoned with people about God’s existence, even using their own philosophical and religious ideas as a starting point (Acts 17:22-31). The Bible, therefore, provides clear precedents for the task of apologetics even if it does not contain the kind of detailed arguments necessary in modern apologetics since it was written in a pre-modern world primarily to believers. Apologetics today continues patterns found in Scripture.

B] Objections from outside the Bible

1. Logic cannot tell us anything about God

This statement is self defeating since it relies on internal logic as the basis for its claim. Logic is simply the way in which we state facts and make claims. In this sense it is impossible to say anything at all about God or anything else without employing logic. As Peter Kreeft and Ronald Tacelli write:⁶

Most people scorn or ignore apologetics because it seems very intellectual, abstract and rational. They contend that life and love and morality and sanctity are much more important than reason. Those who reason this way are right; they just don’t notice that they are reasoning. We can’t avoid doing it, we can only avoid doing it well.

They explain the relationship between the language of logic and argument and the reality of the world we live in:⁷

We write in terms, propositions and arguments because we think in concepts, judgments and reasoning; and we do this because the reality we think about includes essences, facts and causes. Terms express concepts which express essences. Propositions express judgments which express facts. And arguments express reasoning which expresses causes, real ‘because’s and ‘whys’.

Since Christians believe in a God who speaks using human language we must be committed to the belief that language can describe reality in a way that is comprehensible. Although we do not claim we can know every truth about the causes, ‘because’s and ‘whys’ of the universe, we do believe that God has created us in His image as rational people who can comprehend those causes, ‘because’s and ‘whys’ that God has revealed to us through the ordering of nature, through His actions in history and through His words recorded in Scripture.

2. Logic cannot prove the existence of anything

This may be true, but logic can show what things are possible and impossible and even whether something is probable or improbable. Logic, therefore, can point towards the existence of God and the truth of Christianity, even if faith is required to finally embrace it. We can apply the same thinking to relationships – logic can help us decide whether we are loved, but it cannot prove love – love must be experienced. Apologetics helps to bring people to a point where they can enter into relationship with Christ. Part of the problem with this objection is that it depends on the definition of ‘prove’. Very few, if any, things in life can actually be proved conclusively through logic, yet we live as if many things are true. Our knowledge of the world depends on experience as well as reason. Both are valid ways of discovering truth about our world.

3. No one is converted through apologetics

⁶ P. Kreeft.& R. Tacelli *Handbook of Christian Apologetics* (Monarch, 1994), pp.20-21

⁷ P. Kreeft & R. Tacelli *Handbook of Christian Apologetics* (Monarch, 1994), pp.17-18

Whilst apologetics without the gospel is not enough, there is plenty of evidence that God has used apologetic evidence to bring people to Christ. C.S. Lewis wrote that, “nearly everyone I know who has embraced Christianity in adult life has been influenced by what seemed to him to be at least a probable argument for Theism”.⁸ Testimonies of people like Frank Morrison and Augustine support this claim. It is one thing to argue that arguments cannot make a person believe, but quite another to argue from this fact that arguments have no part in the process of moving a person towards faith. In the words of Gresham Machen:⁹

But, because argument is insufficient, it does not follow that it is unnecessary. What the Holy Spirit does in the new birth is not to make a person a Christian regardless of the evidence, but on the contrary to clear away the mists from his eyes and enable him to attend to the evidence.

Again, in the words of Peter Kreeft and Ronald Tacelli, “Arguments may not bring you to faith, but they can certainly keep you away from faith. Therefore we must join the battle of arguments.”¹⁰

A biblical case for the task of apologetics

Several New Testament passages help us understand why we should engage in apologetics and how we should do it. We will consider each of these passages in the order in which they appear in the New Testament, outlining principles for apologetics that arises from them as we do so:

Acts 17:1-4 – “He reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving ...”

This passage speaks of Paul’s activity in Thessalonica amongst the Jews. He went to where they were in the synagogue and he “reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that the Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead”. Paul started with what these Jewish people knew, the Old Testament, and sought to convince them from it of the fact that the Messiah had to die and rise so that he could then tell them that Jesus was the Christ. He was making a logical case for the gospel that he proclaimed, removing the barrier in their minds that said the Messiah could not have suffered as Jesus did. The result was that some were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas – their persuasion was a necessary precursor to their ‘joining’, which implies conversion. The word translated “reasoned” is significant because it means dialogue. Paul’s arguments were not pre-prepared and pre-delivered, they arose in the context of interaction, questions and debate. This is a vital reminder that apologetics is an engagement with people. The same word is used throughout Acts to describe Paul’s approach in different contexts – in Athens both in the synagogue and the market-place (17:17), in Corinth in the synagogue with Jews and Greeks (18:4) and in Ephesus, first for three months in the synagogue and then daily over the course of two years in a rented lecture hall (19:8-10).

- *Biblical apologetics seeks to persuade people of the truth of Christianity so that they can believe in Jesus*
- *Biblical apologetics is not a theoretical exercise – it engages in dialogue with real people with real questions*

Acts 17:22-34 – “He has given proof of this by raising him from the dead”

In this section of Acts we find Paul in a predominantly Gentile context. His approach to proclaiming the gospel is quite different from his approach among the Jews described earlier in the chapter (see above). With the

⁸ C.S. Lewis *God in the Dock* (Eerdmans, 1970), p.173

⁹ G. Machen. quoted in John Stott *The Contemporary Christian* (IVP, 1992), p.59

¹⁰ P. Kreeft & R. Tacelli *Handbook of Christian Apologetics* (Monarch, 1994), p.21

Jews and Gentile God-fearers he started with the Old Testament Scriptures which were familiar to them and which they already accepted as true. In Athens, however, he was among Gentiles who were immersed in Greek thinking. His starting points in communicating his message were therefore:

- a) *Greek religion* – he used a statue dedicated to the “*unknown God*” as a starting point to explain that they did not actually know the one true God who had created them. He had identified a fault-line in their religious thinking – an uncertainty about the true nature and number of the gods – and he used this foothold to begin to demolish their worldview.
- b) *Greek philosophy* – Paul was sufficiently well-versed in the writings of Greek philosopher poets to be able to quote one of them (verse 28). He was able to use the truth within their own belief system, however limited it was, as a platform from which to proclaim the whole message of God of which that truth was part.

Using these starting points he then dangled before them a hook – that the one true God has appointed a man to be judge and that the proof of this was that this man had risen from the dead (verse 31). Whether Paul was cut short at this point by the opposition of some of his audience (verse 32) or whether he deliberately ended his speech at this point with a ‘cliff-hanger’ intended to provoke further discussion we cannot be sure. It is important to notice, however, that he presents the resurrection of Jesus as a key apologetic evidence for the truth of Christianity. Other New Testament passages show that this confidence in the resurrection as the proof of Jesus identity was central to the apostles’ proclamation of the gospel (see Acts 2:32; Romans 1:4; 1 Corinthians 15:3ff.)

This record of Paul’s activity in Athens is sometimes criticised as a failure. It is suggested that it was an attempt by Paul to foray into a different approach and that because it was unsuccessful he reverted to his typical approach based on the Scriptures in the next city he visited, Corinth (Acts 18). This claim is unfair, however, as some, albeit “*a few*”, of Paul’s listeners in Athens did become Christians including at least one member of the Areopagus (verse 34). In addition, as we shall see when we consider 2 Corinthians 10:3-5, Paul did use reason in his work in Corinth. The smaller response among the audience in Athens is likely to have been because it was a less receptive mission field, one that was steeped in Greek ideas and therefore whose people were not easily persuaded. The different approaches Paul took in different cities and contexts should actually be read as a skilful apologetic approach that understood the culture and found common ground from which to begin to persuade people of the truth of the gospel. It is an example of Paul becoming “*all things to all men*” as he told the Corinthians he normally did for the sake of the gospel (note he was contextualising the same unchanging gospel into different cultures) so that he could win some people for Christ (1 Corinthians 9:19-23). Apologetics must work from an understanding of the culture and worldview of the people being reached. It should then start from their current beliefs to build a case for the Christian faith. Acts 17 is a helpful biblical example of positive apologetics in a cross-cultural context. The three different responses of people in Paul’s audience (verses 32-34) also highlight three aims of apologetics:

- *Some sneered* – apologetics seeks to confront false ideas with truth
- *Some said they wanted to hear more* – apologetics seeks to interest people in the claims of the gospel
- *Some believed* – apologetics seeks to persuade people to believe in Christ

Once again we are reminded that apologetics cannot be separated from evangelism and that its goal is not simply to win intellectual debates, but to provoke people to consider the gospel and ultimately to trust in Christ.

- *Biblical apologetics recognises the resurrection of Jesus as a key argument for the truth of the gospel*
- *Biblical apologetics starts from an understanding of people’s worldview to build bridges to Christian truth*
- *Biblical apologetics expects a response – it aims to confront, provoke interest and persuade*

Acts 26:24-29 – “What I am saying is true and reasonable”

In Acts 26 Paul is making a legal defence (an *apologia*, verse 2) against the accusations of the Jews before the Roman Governor Festus and King Agrippa, the son of the Herod Agrippa who had reigned during Jesus’ ministry and execution. After explaining the gospel to Festus Paul was able to say that his words were both true and reasonable – he appealed to Festus to listen to his message both because it was true but also because it made sense. There was no contradiction in Paul’s minds between the gospel and reason, proclaiming the message of Jesus and using sound arguments for it. Apologetics seeks to show that the Christian message is true and that it is reasonable, both in terms of internal logical coherence and its power to explain the world and our experience within it. During this same encounter Paul also turned to King Agrippa, who was present, and asked him if he believed the prophets. Agrippa felt that Paul was trying to “*persuade*” him to be a Christian. A key apologetic argument for Paul, as we have already seen in Acts 17:1-4, particularly amongst Jews was the fact that Christianity fulfilled Old Testament prophecy. This was also an important line of argument for the Second Century apologists and it remains so in modern apologetics.

- *Biblical apologetics seeks to show that the Christian message is both true and reasonable*
- *Biblical apologetics recognises fulfilled prophecy as an important line of evidence for the truth of the gospel*

Romans 1:18-20, 2:14-15 – “what may be known about God ... God has made ... plain to them”

These passages are important because they lay the foundation for the classical approach to apologetics. Paul speaks of two kinds of testimony that are available even to people who have not known the Scriptures or the gospel. These are what we might call general revelation since they are available to everyone, but contrast with special revelation (Scripture and the gospel) which only some have heard. The two witnesses are:

- a) *Creation* (1:18-20) God’s invisible qualities, His eternal power and divine nature, are seen in what He has made. Paul is not claiming that people can know all that can be known about God from Creation, but that some things about Him can be known. Most importantly it is possible, and logical, to know from creation that God exists, and we can also say some things about what He is like – for example He must be intelligent, rational, powerful and capable of relationships. As a result, men are “*without excuse*” (verse 20) if they fail to acknowledge God’s existence. This phrase is significant as it translates the Greek word *anapologētoi* – literally they are “without an apology” or “without a defence”. Paul continues in the rest of chapter 1 to describe how mankind wilfully abandoned their knowledge about God, replacing Him with other gods, with the result that God abandoned them to their own desires which, left without a check, led them to every kind of sinful behaviour.
- b) *Conscience* (2:15) The requirements of the law are written on their hearts. Once again Paul is not saying that every aspect of God’s law can be deduced from the human conscience or that it is a fool-proof guide as to what is right and wrong. The conscience has been damaged by sin and people can even numb their own conscience by repeatedly ignoring it, but still Paul argues that the conscience can act as a guide in morality. There is a universal law written on human hearts.

Based on these verses we should expect to be able to build bridges to the Christian faith from both people’s observations about the world (science) and their innate sense of morality (conscience). We can construct arguments for God’s existence from the recognition of design in nature and the experience of goodness and guilt in the human heart. It must be noted that Paul’s primary concern in Romans 1-2 is with explaining how

nature and conscience leave human beings without excuse and justifies God's righteous judgement of all people, but it is still valid to conclude from what he says that these means of 'general revelation' can speak to people about the truth of the gospel.

- *Biblical apologetics can develop arguments for God's existence from the nature of the universe and from human nature*

2 Corinthians 10:3-5 – “We demolish arguments ... and we take captive every thought”

In these verses Paul describes his ministry in terms of warfare against spiritual strongholds that take the form of arguments and pretensions set against the knowledge of God. This provides a basis for offensive apologetics (the sense is of actively storming strongholds rather than taking a defensive stance), although it is likely that this will not be the task of every believer but a specific calling of some, like Paul, whom God has called for this purpose. It is essential to remember that apologetics is a spiritual enterprise, no less than evangelism, and so we should approach it prayerfully and with care.

- *Biblical apologetics is part of spiritual warfare against powers hostile to God – it must be surrounded by prayer*
- *Biblical apologetics at a higher intellectual level is a ministry entrusted by God to specific individuals*

Philippians 1:7, 16 – “defending and confirming the gospel”

Paul is in prison because he has engaged in defending the gospel (verse 17). This process includes both defending and confirming the message – clearly Paul engaged in both defensive and offensive apologetics. Notice, however, that it is the gospel that Paul defends and confirms. For him the task of apologetics always led to the gospel. We must never separate apologetics from evangelism, since it is the gospel that saves, not simply evidential and philosophical proofs of God's existence and Christ's historicity. We must seek to lead people to the message of the cross, the claims of Christ and the implications for their lives.

- *Biblical apologetics involves both defending the gospel against attack and proactively building a case for the gospel*
- *Biblical apologetics should always lead to the gospel, since it is the gospel that saves*

1 Peter 3:13-16 – “Always be prepared to give an answer for the hope that you have”

This passage provides a firm basis for defensive apologetics (dealing with questions people ask) as it envisages believers providing an answer to those who ask them why they have such hope. It teaches several key principles for apologetics. Firstly, apologetics is the task of all believers, not simply an intellectual elite – all should be prepared to give a defence. Secondly, arguments cannot be separated from the power of a provocative lifestyle – people should see our hope and ask us about it and our good behaviour should make the strongest case for the truth we declare. We should be eager to “do good” and this includes being eager to share our faith with others. Thirdly, our confidence comes from knowing that Christ is Lord (Peter's quote from Isaiah 8:12 in verse 14 of his letter actually identifies Jesus as the LORD Almighty) – fear of Him is the antidote

to fear of man. Fourthly, our attitude in engaging should be humility (not placing confidence in ourselves but in God) and fear of God (“respect” in verse 15 really means reverence for God, not respect for the people who ask us or for their beliefs, although proper respect is also important in our witness according to 1 Peter 2:17). Consider the following tagline from an apologetics website:

designed to help you engage your neighbors with hard-hitting evidence as to why society cannot survive without Christian truth, and why it is indeed true. It is vital that believers be equipped in the battle to defend Christian truth.

It is difficult to see how this language is consistent with humility here? Do we really need to be “hard-hitting” in our answers and do we really want to “battle to defend”? Of course, we realise that there is a spiritual battle ongoing (see 2 Corinthians 10:3-5) but we need to realise that the enemy is the spiritual forces that blind and ensnare people rather than the people themselves. We can use strong arguments without being “hard-hitting” towards the people we speak to. Peter Kreeft and Ronald Tacelli write:¹¹

Apologetic arguments are like military hardware... In this warfare we defend reason as well as faith, for reason is the friend of truth, and unfaith is untrue. In defending the faith we take back territory of the mind that is rightfully ours, or rather God's... But the warfare is against unbelief, not unbelievers... The goal of apologetics is not victory but truth. Both sides win.

This passage helps us to overcome some common barriers Christians identify when thinking about evangelism and apologetics:

- **Lack of interest:**
 - a) *On their part* – “everyone who asks you” – our different lives should provoke an interest in them
 - b) *On our part* – “if you are eager to do good” – we ought to have a desire to bless others by sharing our hope
- **Lack of distinctiveness:**
 - a) *Our actions* – “good ... conscience ... conduct” – we must have clear consciences to have confidence in sharing
 - b) *Our attitude* – “Do not fear their fears ... your hope” – do we react differently to the challenges of this world?
- **Lack of confidence – fear of:**
 - a) *Rejection* – “do not be afraid. Rather set Christ apart as Lord in your hearts” – who do we fear? Man or God?
 - b) *Getting it wrong* – “with humility” – we don’t have to have all the right answers; we point to Christ, not ourselves

- *Biblical apologetics at the level of explaining the reason for our hope is the task of all believers – all should be prepared*
- *Biblical apologetics is pointless without a consistent Christian lifestyle – our hope and goodness is the greatest apologetic*
- *Biblical apologetics draws confidence from the Lordship of Christ – fear of God eliminates fear of man*
- *Biblical apologetics must be practiced with the correct attitude – humility and dependence on God*

¹¹ P. Kreeft & R. Tacelli *Handbook of Christian Apologetics* (Monarch, 1994), p.22

The dynamic of apologetic dialogue

Apologetics may happen at many different levels, from the highly formal and intellectual (e.g. debates with leading atheist thinkers, presentations in universities and parliaments) to the highly informal and less strictly intellectual. Much of what follows in this section presumes the more informal interactions that every believer should expect to engage in through the normal process of life as described in 1 Peter 3. A skilful apologist is not necessarily a person who has memorised wonderful answers to pre-set questions, although some prior thinking will certainly help, but a person who knows how to engage effectively in conversations with people. There is no such thing as a 'standard person' or a 'standard relationship' or a 'standard conversation', so there cannot be a 'standard answer' to any given question. The aim of this section is to reflect on the dynamics of a conversation with a non-believer. Based on 1 Peter 3:13-16 and on personal experience we can consider the constituent parts of this interaction:

A context

The context in which an apologetic interchange takes place is vital to the dynamic of the conversation. This works at a number of levels:

- a) *The relationship between the two persons* – how well you know the other person and the nature of your relationship will affect the way you interact and how direct and deep you feel you can be. The dynamic will be very different if you are speaking with a close relative, a lifelong friend, a neighbour, a casual acquaintance, a work colleague or a person with whom you have just sparked off a conversation.
- b) *The immediate situation* – depending on the place, time and social setting you are in you may have greater or lesser freedom to talk at length and at a more personal level. Consider the difference between a crowded room or two people alone in a living room or the difference between a party and a funeral.
- c) *The wider context* – every interaction happens within a wider social, cultural and historical context. Conversations may be freer in an open liberal democracy compared to a closed society. Recent events in the news may be the catalyst for a conversation and will likely inform and shape the way it unfolds. Different cultures will appreciate and permit different degrees of informality and directness. Where the social and cultural gap is greater between the two parties greater sensitivity will often be required.

You (the 'apologist')

A hope filled person who fears no one but Christ and is living out their "good behaviour" for all to see with a clear conscience. Your personal story is the greatest defence of all – told with humility and sincerity it is hard to argue with! You may feel that you are not the best person to be dealing with this question or this person, but you are the person who is here right now and you must trust that the situation is no coincidence and that God will use you to bear witness to Christ in this moment. You should approach the conversation with confidence in God but humility as regards your own ability and your understanding of the other person. Peter Kreeft and Ronald Tacelli give a necessary warning about the importance of the person of the 'apologist' in a dialogue when they say that: "*an argument in apologetics, when actually used in dialogue, is an extension of the arguer. The arguer's tone, sincerity, care, concern, listening and respect matter as much as his or her logic – probably more.*"¹²

A questioner

You need to consider who the person you are speaking with is. What cultural and religious background do they come from? What experiences have they had that might lie behind their question or colour their perspective on Christianity? Where do they stand as regards the Christian faith (hostile, indifferent,

¹² P. Kreeft & R. Tacelli *Handbook of Christian Apologetics* (Monarch, 1994), p.23

interested, challenged, formerly believed, believer, doubting)? It is also worth considering at this stage what point in the gospel story they stick at. It will usually be one of the following points:

- God as Creator (does He exist?) / His character (is He really good and loving?)
- Human sin (are we really that bad?) / need of God (can't we live without God?)
- Person of Jesus (did He exist and who was He?) and work of Jesus (why did He die and did He really rise again?)
- Point of conversion (are they willing and ready to repent and believe?)
- Christian lacking assurance (are they confident in God's salvation and assured in His love?)

Kenneth Boa and Robert Bowman suggest that different approaches to apologetics will be most valuable for people at different stages on this journey towards faith. They write:¹³

elements of the fideist approach are most valuable at the extreme ends of the process of a person moving intellectually from unbelief to faith. This is because fideism is strongest in dealing with the personal or volitional dimension of apologetic questions. The Reformed approach is strongest in exposing the irrationality of unbelief (vital early in the process) and affirming the exclusivity of the Christian truth claims (vital near the end of the process). The classical and evidential approaches are strongest in defending specific truth claims that tend to be questioned in the middle of the process.

The following table indicates how this is likely to work in practice:

Stance regarding faith	Dominant approach	Typical questions / objections	Possible apologetic arguments
Disinterested / ignorant	Fideism	It doesn't matter to me if God exists or not.	If God exists, it matters! [Pascal's Wager] (F)
Sceptical	Reformed apologetics	God may be real to you, but he's not to me.	Is Jesus real enough for you? (F) You live every day as if God exists. (R)
Confused	Classical apologetics	How do you know there is a God?	Without God, there is no meaning. (R) No other worldview makes sense. (C) There are many lines of evidence. (E)
Has specific objections	Evidentialism / Classical apologetics	The stories in the Bible are hard to believe. Why must we believe in the God of the Bible? How do we know Jesus rose from the dead? Wasn't Jesus just a great prophet or a good man?	If God exists, nothing is too hard for him. (C) God fulfilled prophecy and did miracles. (E) The tomb was empty and people saw Jesus. (E) Great prophets and good men don't claim falsely to be God. (C)
Feeling challenged	Reformed apologetics	Why is Christianity alone the truth?	God's claims in the Bible are exclusive – other religions cannot be true. (R)
Lingering doubts	Fideism	I'd like to believe, but I'm not sure.	Read the Gospels and get to know Jesus. (F)

NOTE – Letters in brackets indicate the different apologetic approaches: (F)ideism, (R)eformed, (C)lassical, (E)vidential

¹³ <http://bible.org/seriespage/speaking-truth-love-perspectives-apologetics> (accessed 6th April 2021)

A question

Make sure you have actually listened carefully to what they say rather than assuming that they have said what you expected or wanted to hear. We would do well to heed the wisdom of Proverbs 18:13: *“he who answers before listening – that is his folly and his shame.”* To be effective in the task of apologetics we must learn to be good listeners. You might also consider what lies behind this question – why have they asked it? Is the question:

- A window into the person’s heart and mind, a cry for help and meaning arising from personal pain and confusion?
- A test to see if you really care and if you have thought through your faith?
- A smokescreen intended to distract from the real issue that challenges them?
- A snare to draw you into a pointless argument?

Wisdom and discernment will be needed to decide what lies behind a question and therefore how you should answer. Consider, for example, the question of how a good God could allow suffering. The way you respond will be (or should be) very different depending on whether the person has just been bereaved or received a bad diagnosis recently or if they are studying a course in philosophy but have had no recent personal suffering.

An answer

Peter calls it a defence or a reason and he calls us to be prepared. Christians ought to be thinking people. We must also be ready to respond, or to come back to the person with an answer if we don’t know how to. There are some excellent resources available to help us (see the recommended reading). Of course it may be that we don’t initially respond to the question with an ‘answer’. We may learn from Jesus’ example that often the best way to respond initially is with another question. Asking questions can be a vital way to:

- Clarify the question they are asking (*“Do you mean ...?”*)
- Probe their motivation in asking (*“What causes you to think that?”*)
- Encourage them to reflect on what they are asking (*“I have often wondered that too, and it makes me ask ... What do you think?”*)
- Gently expose inconsistencies in their arguments (*“If that is the case, does that not mean ...?”*)
- Show a genuine concern for them and understand where they are coming from (*“Is that something that you’ve personally experienced?”*)
- Demonstrate our humility in not acting like a professional question answerer (*“I’d love to hear what you think about that yourself first.”*)

The aim is to engage in a conversation rather than an “argument” (here using the word in the popular sense of a heated exchange rather than to describe a logical case for a point) and the key difference between the two is that in a conversation two people listen to one another whereas in an argument they speak at (or over) one another. Conversations move towards greater understanding, whereas arguments move towards greater alienation.

Christ

The one who is Lord! We should always aim to bring the conversation back to him. Our aim should be to try to connect the discussion into the gospel story. Remember also that the greatest apologetic evidence for the gospel is the resurrection of Jesus Christ. In addition, remembering that Christ is present in the apologetic encounter should keep us prayerful and mindful of the underlying spiritual battle we engage in.

Conclusion

The intention of this article has been to introduce the Christian reader to apologetics and in some way to demystify a topic that many Christians find intimidating. I have deliberately not included detailed arguments for the existence of God or about specific objections to the Christian faith, since my intention has been to build a case for why every Christian should have an interest in apologetics and how every Christian can begin to engage in apologetic dialogue. For greater detail on the issues covered in this article and many examples of specific arguments the reader is referred to the *Recommended resources* that follow.

In conclusion I simply want to encourage you, the reader, to have boldness in sharing your faith and engaging with the questions people ask. This boldness is not drawn from arrogance but from a confidence in Christ as Lord and a joy in the living hope He has won for us. For those who have a particular love of intellectual arguments I encourage you to continue loving God with “*all your mind*” but to be sure that you reflect on the personal stories that lie behind the questions people ask and that you seek to live in and share God’s grace in your attitude and words. Above all, let us continue to serve God with a clear conscience so that our provocative lifestyles will provoke and interest and provide a case that cannot be easily assailed. May our lives, actions and words be shaped by the love and truth we have discovered in Christ Jesus. My aim is to encourage and challenge you as Paul did the Colossians:

My purpose is that they may be encouraged in heart and united in love, so that they may have the full riches of complete understanding, in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. I tell you this so that no-one may deceive you by fine-sounding arguments... So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness. See to it that no-one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ.

Colossians 2:2-4, 6-8

Recommended resources

Books: introductory level

Josh McDowell

A Ready Defence: the best of Josh McDowell compiled by Bob Wilson (Thomas Nelson, 1990)

Amy Orr-Ewing

But is it Real? Answering 10 common objections to the Christian faith (IVP, 2008)

Is the Bible Intolerant? Sexist? Oppressive? Homophobic? Outdated? Irrelevant? (IVP, 2005)

Lee Strobel

The Case for a Creator: a journalist investigates scientific evidence that points toward God (Zondervan, 2004)

The Case for Christ: a journalist's personal investigation of the evidence for Jesus (Zondervan, 1998)

The Case for Faith: a journalist investigates the toughest objections to Christianity (Zondervan, 2000)

Books: intermediate level

Timothy Keller

The Reason for God: belief in an age of scepticism (Dutton, 2008)

Peter Kreeft and Ronald Tacelli

Pocket Handbook of Christian Apologetics (IVP, 2003)

C.S. Lewis

Mere Christianity (Harper Collins, 1952)

Miracles (Harper Collins, 1947)

The Problem of Pain (Harper Collins, 1940)

Francis Schaeffer

Francis A. Schaeffer Trilogy: the three essential books in one volume (Crossway, 1990)

[*The God Who Is There* (1968), *Escape From Reason* (1968) and *He Is There and He is Not Silent* (1972)]

Books: advanced level

William Lane Craig

Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics, 3rd edition (Crossway, 2008)

Steven B. Cowan (editor)

Five Views on Apologetics (Zondervan, 2000)

John C. Lennox

God's Undertaker: has science buried God? (Lion, 2007)

Online resources

www.bethinking.org – many useful resources streamed according to introductory, intermediate and advanced levels.

www.carm.org – *Christian Apologetics and Research Ministry*, a catalogue of resources maintained by Matt Slick

apologetics315.com – an extensive collection of podcasts, interviews, book reviews and articles