

What is Apologetics?

The word apologetics comes from the Greek word *apologia*, which is found seventeen times in the New Testament. It can be translated as “a defense,” and is a judicial term implying a reasoned argument, vindication, or defense. In its original use, the term *apologia* referred to a legal defense given in response to an accusation. In modern usage, the term apologetics takes on a larger scope of meaning. Christian philosopher William Lane Craig presents a concise definition of apologetics in its contemporary form:

Apologetics is that branch of Christian theology which seeks to provide a rational justification for the truth claims of the Christian faith. [...] 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.¹

Apologetics at its core simply makes a case for the truthfulness of Christianity. As theologian Gordon R. Lewis states: “Apologetics...examines Christianity’s most basic presuppositions. It considers *why* we should start with Christian presuppositions rather than others.”² Apologetics answers the question, “Why should I believe that Christianity is true?” Although the answers to this question are manifold, the goal is to convince and persuade the questioner of the truthfulness of Christianity. Apologetics provides reasons to believe, both in defending the Gospel and in proclaiming it.

The purpose of this paper is to present the Biblical mandate for apologetics, refute some common objections to apologetics, and to contend that apologetics is just as

¹William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2008), p. 15.

²Gordon R. Lewis, *Testing Christianity’s Truth Claims* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1990), p. 21.

relevant today as it was in the formation of the early Christian Church.

Three Basic Functions of Apologetics

First, apologetics is used in a proactive way to prove the truth of Christianity and to persuade unbelievers to believe. This may involve arguments from history, philosophy, science, culture, logic, and testimony, among others. The purpose is simply to build a reasonable case to persuade the unbeliever. Removing intellectual stumbling blocks is a key element. “Apologetic argument may not create belief, but it creates the atmosphere in which belief can come to life.”³

Second, apologetics is used defensively when criticism or attack comes against the Gospel. Inevitably, Christianity will be attacked. However, apologetics defends the faith by providing a rational and reasonable basis for belief and contending for the truth. Defensive apologetics can guard the Church from false doctrine by refuting error and exposing false teaching. The Church has the opportunity to gain a more robust faith when the Gospel is strongly defended against opposition. Martin Luther noted that when the Gospel is attacked, it has an opportunity to gain strength:

If the devil were wise enough and would stand by in silence and let the gospel be preached, he would suffer less harm. For when there is no battle for the gospel it rusts and it finds no cause and no occasion to show its vigor and power. Therefore, nothing better can befall the gospel than that the world should fight it with force and cunning.⁴

Third, apologetics strengthens the faith of believers. Just as there are attacks upon the Gospel itself, there are times when the faith of individual believers is tested and tried. This may come from voices of doubt, worldly influences, personal crises, or any number

³Ibid., p. 23.

⁴Martin Luther, source unknown.

of other sources. However, apologetics can play a key role in anchoring the faith of a Christian when faced with times of doubt. This anchoring also allows for the Christian to be a bolder witness to the world, as he is prepared for all kinds of common objections he may face from unbelievers.

Biblical Examples of Apologetics

The use of apologetics during the formation of the early Church is evident in the preaching of the apostles, and in the history recorded in the New Testament. Various proofs, such as historical evidence and eyewitness testimony, are often used in presenting a rational case for Christianity. In the first sermon at Pentecost (Acts 3:15), the apostle Peter appeals to the testimony of those who had been eyewitnesses to the resurrection of Jesus. “God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of the fact.” (Acts 2:32 NIV) Peter again appealed to the same evidence when later persecuted (Acts 5:30-32).

The apostle Paul is an example of the use of apologetics in the early Church. The scripture tells us that it was Paul’s custom to go to the synagogue and reason with the Jews from the scriptures (Acts 17:22). In fact, very early after his conversion, Paul (then called Saul) would argue for the truth of Christianity with effectiveness: “Yet Saul grew more and more powerful and baffled the Jews living in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Christ.” (Acts 9:22 NIV) Christian persuasion was Paul’s goal. “Every Sabbath he reasoned in the synagogue, trying to persuade Jews and Greeks.” (Acts 18:4) Paul argued extensively for Christianity. His apologetics and his evangelism were inseparable.

Paul entered the synagogue and spoke boldly there for three months, arguing persuasively about the kingdom of God. But some of them became obstinate; they refused to believe and publicly maligned the Way. So Paul left them. He took the disciples with him and had discussions daily in the lecture hall of Tyrannus. This went on for two years, so that all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord. (Acts 19:8-10 NIV)

Paul saw it as his role as a messenger of the Gospel to both proclaim it and defend it. He was an apologist, as he made clear to the Philippians: “It is right for me to feel this way about all of you, since I have you in my heart; for whether I am in chains or *defending and confirming the gospel*, all of you share in God's grace with me.” (emphasis added, Philippians 1:7 NIV) In the same chapter he continues, “...knowing that I am put here for the *defense* of the gospel. (emphasis added, Philippians 1:16b NIV)

In the seventeenth chapter of the book of Acts, Paul engages in more apologetic preaching in Athens:

While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols. So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there. A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to dispute with him. Some of them asked, "What is this babbler trying to say?" Others remarked, "He seems to be advocating foreign gods." They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection. Then they took him and brought him to a meeting of the Areopagus, where they said to him, "May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears, and we want to know what they mean." (Acts 17:16-20 NIV)

During the sermon that follows, Paul reasons with his listeners regarding creation, he appeals to the words of their own poets, and points to the proof of the resurrection. The outcome involved the conversion of some, continued interest of others, and scoffing from the rest: “When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered, but others said, ‘We want to hear you again on this subject.’ At that, Paul left the Council. A few men became followers of Paul and believed.” (Acts 17:32-34a NIV)

The Alexandrian Jew Apollos also became an ardent apologist to the Jews. Apollos was a learned man with a thorough knowledge of the scriptures (Acts 18:24). The book of Acts records that “...he vigorously refuted the Jews in public debate, proving from the Scriptures that Jesus was the Christ.” (Acts 18:28 NIV)

Not only did the early apostolic preaching contain apologetic elements, but the books of the New Testament themselves are apologetic in many aspects. A large part of the motivation of the authors of New Testament scripture was to make a case for the truthfulness of Christianity. The apostle John explains the purpose of writing his Gospel: Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written 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 NIV)

John makes it clear that his intention in writing his Gospel was to present evidence (namely, the accounts of Jesus' miracles and resurrection) so that the reader may be persuaded to believe. John's Gospel could be understood as an evangelistic document that employs apologetics in its approach.

Luke the physician had similar motives and methods when he authored his Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles:

Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught. (Luke 1:1-4 NIV)

Here Luke states up-front what his motives are for authoring the Gospel that bears his name. His goal is to persuade his readers of the actual reality of the Gospel. His method involved investigation, historical research, and appeal to eyewitness accounts. He also mentions that many have sought to record the actual events that took place regarding the life of Jesus. The Gospel of Luke is a case for the truth of Christianity—an apologetic document. The physician follows the same pattern when recording the Acts of the Apostles:

In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen. After his suffering, he showed himself to these men and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God. (Acts 1:1-3)

Again Luke is forthright in his motivation for writing. He appeals to “many convincing proofs” of the resurrection of Jesus, and alludes to the lengthy eyewitness accounts of the resurrected Christ. Indeed, the centrality of the resurrection was and still is a focal point of apologetics. In fact, Jesus himself appealed to his miracles as proof of his divinity:

Why then do you accuse me of blasphemy because I said, 'I am God's Son'? Do not believe me unless I do what my Father does. But if I do it, even though you do not believe me, believe the miracles, that you may know and understand that the Father is in me, and I in the Father. (John 10:36b-38 NIV)

Jesus pointed to his resurrection as the central proof that his claims were true.

He answered, "A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a miraculous sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. (Matthew 12:39,40 NIV)

As the Gospel was proclaimed and propagated, opposition soon arose. Historian Avery Cardinal Dulles explains apologetics was inseparable from the proclamation of the Gospel message:

As the message concerning Jesus as risen Lord was proclaimed, it gave rise to certain questions and objections from inquirers, from believers, and from adversaries. In answer to such objections, and possibly also in anticipation of foreseen objections, the Christian preachers spoke about the signs and evidences they had found convincing. They insisted, for instance, that Jesus spoke with unique power, that He performed wondrous deeds, that He fulfilled the Old Testament messianic prophecies, and that He had undoubtedly risen from the dead. Factual memories, dogmatic reflections, and apologetic arguments became so intertwined in the apostolic preaching that it would be artificial to try to draw a line between them. ... To some degree, therefore, apologetics was intrinsic to the presentation of the kerygma.⁵

⁵Avery Cardinal Dulles, *A History of Apologetics* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2005), p. 2.

The Biblical Mandate for Apologetics

Not only does the New Testament show many examples of apologetics, it also commands believers to use apologetics. As the first apologist at Pentecost, the apostle Peter appropriately presents a mandate for apologetics to all believers:

but sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a *defense* to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence; and keep a good conscience so that in the thing in which you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ will be put to shame. (emphasis added, 1 Peter 3:15,16 NASB)

The command for believers is that we always be ready with apologetics. Christians should be able to give reasons why they believe. Shall a Christian obey the command to sanctify Christ as Lord, but disobey the command to be ready to make a defense? The context of Peter's command implies that apologetics goes hand-in-hand with a godly character and lifestyle, which are a testimony to unbelievers.

In his exhortation to the Colossian church, the apostle Paul emphasizes the importance of apologetics as part of a godly example to unbelievers: "Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone." (Colossians 4:5,6) Giving an answer to those who ask is part of making the most of every opportunity to share the Gospel.

When listing the requirements for church overseers, Paul adds the skills of an apologist to the list. "He must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it." (Titus 1:9) Refuting doctrines that oppose the Gospel is part of the apologetic task, as it defends the Gospel from corruption. Jude makes this point plainly in his epistle: "Dear

friends, although I was very eager to write to you about the salvation we share, I felt I had to write and urge you to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints.” (Jude 3 NIV) Jude’s letter continues in a defense against false teaching that was threatening the church.

Common Objections to Apologetics

Although apologetics has been practiced since the birth of the Church and throughout Church history, there still arise some common objections to apologetics from believers. One objection is: “You cannot reason someone into the kingdom.” This objection fails to take into account that the Holy Spirit may use reason to bring someone to faith. To quote Gordon Lewis, “the Holy Spirit alone regenerates; but the Holy Spirit has chosen not to regenerate alone.”⁶ As we have seen above, the apostles appealed to reason on numerous occasions. The most basic Gospel appeal will involve an element of reason. “‘Come now, let us reason together,’ says the LORD. ‘Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool.’” (Isaiah 1:18 NIV).

Another objection to apologetics is: “The Bible does not need to be defended.” This objection suggests that the Bible, as the Word of God, is sufficiently powerful in and of itself to do the convincing of the unbeliever. The problem with this objection is that the Bible *does* need to be defended. If someone believes the Bible is just a book full of myths and stories, they have no cause to submit to it. Lewis points out:

If the Bible expresses God’s eternal truth, of course that needs no support from men. The question has to do with the image of the Bible in the minds of young people who for twelve to sixteen years of public school education have heard the Bible’s

⁶Lewis, p. 26.

authority questioned and its teachings challenged.⁷

Why should someone obey the Bible if they have no *reason* to believe that it is true?

Therefore, apologetics is necessary as a means of “pre-evangelism.”

Still another objection that may be heard is, “apologetics is an intellectual distraction from the Gospel.” This objection asserts that belief is spiritual and any intellectual activity in an evangelistic encounter is simply a hindrance to the preaching of the Gospel. This objection is not without an element of truth. Discussions with an unbeliever may simply spawn intellectual smoke screens. If the apologist is not discerning, he may be led off into discussions that have no real bearing on the truth of the Gospel.

However, just because apologetics can be used poorly or improperly does not mean that we should abandon its use. On the contrary, apologetics used properly during an evangelistic conversation may be exactly what is needed to clear the intellectual smoke screens and point the encounter back towards the cross. A wise evangelist will use apologetics in a tactful and appropriate manner in order to remove obstacles to belief. As the apostle Paul exhorts us: “We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.” (2 Corinthians 10:5 NIV)

Conclusion

Apologetics is a reasoned defense of the Christian faith. It has been used throughout Church history and the Bible commands us to use apologetics. Apologetics makes a positive case for Christianity, removes obstacles to the Gospel, refutes false teaching, and strengthens the faith of believers.

⁷Lewis, p.25.

In conclusion, apologetics as a discipline brings glory to God. An expert in the law once came to Jesus and asked him a question: “Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?” Jesus replied: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and *with all your mind.*”” (emphasis added, Matthew 22:36 NIV) God has blessed all believers with the opportunity to worship Him through the intellectual pursuit of Christ.