

Apologetics: What? Why? How?

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A. What?

What is apologetics? Apologetics is a systematic defense of the Christian faith. Its purpose is to show that faith in Jesus is logical, reasonable and correct.

B. Why?

Some people will ask, "Why do we need apologetics?" We live by faith, not by reason. There's a lot of truth to that. Romans 1:17 says, "The righteous will live by faith." Human reason is not the final authority for what we believe. But Christians should not be unreasonable. We were made in the image of God, and God is reasonable. God doesn't want us to suppress all our thinking. I'll give you three reasons why apologetics may be important.

First, because of the times in which we live. A hundred years ago, our culture was predominantly Christian. At that time, there may not have been a great need for apologetics. But times have changed. We live in a post-Christian era. Faith in Jesus is not taken seriously in the media, in colleges and universities, and in popular culture. Sharing our faith in this kind of environment is going to require at least some apologetics.

Second, because we need to grow in faith. I know this from personal experience. When I first became a Christian, there were many conflicts in my mind. I thought there were serious discrepancies between the Bible and science. Most of my friends were non-Christian, and they were very good at arguing their position. I could not answer all their objections. But at my first Bible conference, I received God's word from John 13:7, where Jesus said to his disciples: "You do not realize now what I am doing, but later you will understand." Through this verse I realized that I didn't need to resolve everything right away. I didn't need to now all the answers. God would reveal his truth to me in his right time. This gave me a sense of peace, and I didn't think much about apologetics. As time goes on, however, if we don't resolve these conflicts, we can get into trouble. Jesus must be Lord of everything, including our thought-world. If we don't resolve the conflicts between our faith and the rest of our thinking, we end up locking our faith inside a box. We keep our faith separate from our moral choices, our friendships, our studies, and the other important areas of life. That's not healthy. God wants our faith to grow until it encompasses all the different areas of life. In order to please God, we need to be converted in body, mind and soul.

Third, because we should be prepared to share our faith with anyone at anytime. 1 Peter 3:15 says: "But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect..." If we are not thoroughly Christian in our way of

thinking, then we will not be ready to share our faith. We will miss many important opportunities. Sometimes sharing our faith means giving comfort and encouragement to those who need it, Sometimes it means living a holy life when others can see, so that our lifestyle becomes a witness. And sometimes it means giving answers to tough questions that people have about all sorts of issues related to faith. We need to be prepared to do any of these things as the opportunities arise.

C. How?

Now we know why apologetics is important. The next question is how. How do we share our faith with people who have difficult questions?

Apologetics is not about winning an argument. In the 2004 presidential campaign, John Kerry seemed to be a better debater than George W. Bush. He was quick with the facts. He didn't stumble over words. He was on the attack. People say that Kerry won the debates (at least the first one). But he didn't win the election. Some people didn't vote for him because they didn't think he was a nice guy. If we win a debate, there's a danger that we may hurt the other person and drive him away. It's better to lose an argument and win the person's heart.

Apologetics is about listening. We have to find out what the real concerns are. Sometimes a person will raise some logical arguments, but what he is most concerned about peer pressure; he doesn't want to take a position that will cause him to be humiliated by his friends. To find out what's really on a person's mind takes time. It takes listening. Sometimes we are too quick to judge the other person. We may think that questions being raised come from a sinful mind. ("He's just being rebellious. He should repent and believe the Bible.") But people do have honest questions that need to be answered. Many questions come from a desire to know truth. We should give people the benefit of the doubt. We should treat them seriously and with respect.

Apologetics is about love. People want to be correct. But they really want to be loved. If they sense that you are just trying to make them accept your point of view, they will close their hearts because they won't trust you. "People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care." Real communication requires trust, and trust is established through love.

Apologetics is about humility. To admit that you are wrong and accept an opposing point of view is a humiliating experience. If we want other people to be humble enough to listen to us, we have to show them how by our example. If we are humble, we don't have to try to answer every question. No one knows all the answers except Jesus. One good answer is better than a hundred superficial ones. One good answer may be enough to open a person's heart and help him to believe.

D. Two big issues

As we try to share our faith with non-believers today, there are two big issues that come up over and over.

First is the conflict between the Bible and science. This really began in the late 18th century, during a period called the Scientific Revolution. Some scholars call it the Age of Enlightenment. During that time, a big chasm opened up in the way people think. One side of this chasm is the realm of science. This is what people call “fact.” This is what people “know” to be true. This kind of knowledge is considered objective. This can be taught in a public school. On the other side is the realm of religion. This is where people get their values. This is what people believe. These things are considered subjective. You would not be allowed to teach this in a public school. Now suppose a conflict comes up between what science says and what the Bible says. And suppose you divide up knowledge in this way, classifying science as objective and religion as subjective. Then which side is going to win? Of course. In this environment, science always has the upper hand, regardless of which side is right.

Today there are many apparent conflicts between what modern science says and what the Bible says. How do we resolve these conflicts? I’m going to show you a short clip from a Christian movie called *Time Changer*. The year is 1901. A professor is teaching at a Bible college, and he’s lecturing students on the role of the Bible in regard to science. Listen to what he says. (show clip) How many of you agree with what he said? How many of you disagree? How many of you are not sure? This is a tough call. Some would call this a “fundamentalist” point of view. This man is willing to trust science as long as it agrees with the Bible. If a disagreement should come up, he will use the Bible to overrule the science. On the other hand, some Christians with a liberal viewpoint do the exact opposite. Whenever a disagreement comes up, they will let science overrule the Bible. Which of these two points of view is correct? As you might guess, I don’t like either of these approaches. Both of them have a problem. The problem is that human beings can be wrong about anything. Our science can be wrong. And our understanding of the Bible can be wrong. We need to allow for both of these possibilities.

There’s a good example of this. Galileo Galilei (1564-1642) was an important figure in the history of science. He was a devout Christian. Based on careful observation, he believed that the universe was heliocentric—that the earth revolved around the sun. Religious leaders at that time, however, believed the universe was geocentric—that the sun revolved around the earth. They arrested Galileo and persecuted him until he recanted his popular understanding of the Bible was wrong. Today we understand that the Bible doesn’t really teach that the sun moves around the earth. That theory was based more on the teachings of Aristotle than on the Bible. But at that time it was considered a tenet of the Christian faith. In that case, the popular understanding of the Bible was wrong. But there have also been many cases where science has been wrong and the popular understanding of the Bible was right. It can go either way.

Here’s a statement made by Galileo: “It is most pious to say and most prudent to take for granted that Holy Scripture can never lie, as long as its true meaning has been grasped...” I agree with this statement. There can be many conflicts between faulty science and faulty

interpretations of the Bible. But there is no conflict between real science and real Bible truth.

The **second** big issue in modern apologetics is the climate of religious pluralism. Pluralism says that no religious group is inherently better than another. That no one should claim to know the truth. That everyone should just stop arguing over who's right and get along. This idea of pluralism has permeated our society. If we take this to its logical conclusion, what happens to the Bible? Biblical Christianity, which maintains that Jesus is the only way to God, that he is the savior of all people, and so on, is immediately seen as closed-minded, arrogant and even racist.

There are many things that I could say about religious pluralism. I'll just make a few comments. First, we can agree with the pluralists that at times Christians have been narrow-minded, bigoted and proud. In the course of spreading the gospel, missionaries from the west have sometimes imposed their culture on native people. Even today, Christians sometimes confuse their own cultural ideas for the gospel. This has always been a struggle for the church. All we can do is be humble, repent, study the Bible, and try to separate the gospel message from our own cultural bias. Second, I think we can all agree that no one has the right to impose their own religious beliefs on others by force. God does not force people to believe. God respects free will, and he wants people to come to him freely. So we should respect human freedom. Also, we can agree that no culture or religious group or denomination can claim to own 100% of the truth. Everyone has been wrong sometimes. There is so much that we do not know. We can agree with a lot that the religious pluralists are saying. Much of the impulse behind pluralism is right.

But there's a very big problem with this way of thinking. The problem is that religious pluralism is logically impossible. Religions do not preach the same things. Christians believe that Jesus died on the cross. Muslims say that he didn't. Who's right? It either happened or it didn't happen. You can't have it both ways. There's a movie called *The Perfect Stranger*. In this movie, a woman receives an invitation to come to dinner at a fancy restaurant. The invitation is signed "Jesus Christ." She goes to dinner and finds a man waiting for her. She thinks it's a practical joke. But she stays for dinner and starts bringing up all kinds of questions about faith. The whole movie is full of apologetics. It's a good movie, and I recommend that you watch it. Here I'll show a clip where they are talking about different religions. (show clip) This clip shows how religious pluralism cannot be true. It contradicts itself. People who say that there is no absolute truth have already contradicted themselves, because that statement itself is an absolute truth claim.

E. Styles of apologetics

Apologetics is just another word for really understanding what we believe. It's a fancy word for strengthening our faith and sharing our faith. In apologetics, there are different methods and styles. There is no "one size fits all" approach, because people are different. Some people like to discuss philosophy. Other people are interested in science or history or something else. They have different questions that need to be answered. The best way to share our faith with someone is to get to know them, find out how they think and what

they are interested in, and try to meet them where they are. Now I'll briefly mention some different apologetic styles.

One style could be called a **forensic approach**. Forensic science is the collection of evidence that could be used to prove a case in a court of law. Many people over the years have taken this approach to see whether the claims of the Bible are true. Two centuries ago, there was a great legal scholar named Simon Greenleaf. He was one of the founders of the Harvard School of Law. He was also a committed atheist. He decided to prove that the resurrection of Jesus never happened, and that Christianity was a hoax. But when he looked at the evidence, he was forced to change his mind. He became a Christian because the evidence was overwhelming. He wrote: "The resurrection of Jesus is one of the best established facts of history." There are many good books on this style of apologetics. One of the best known is *Evidence that demands a verdict* by Josh McDowell. Lee Strobel was a famous crime reporter for the Chicago Tribune. He was also an atheist who believed that Christianity was a big hoax. Then he started to look into it and found that the evidence in favor of it is overwhelming. He wrote *The Case for Christ*. Phillip E. Johnson is a famous law professor at U.C. Berkeley. He wrote a good book called *Darwin on Trial* where he brings the tools of legal evidence to the debate between creation and evolution. He does not say that everything biologists are teaching is wrong. But he does show that the biologists who strongly push the theory of evolution are not objectively looking at the facts. They have strong beliefs and philosophies and bias. He shows that the modern theory of evolution is like a religion; it claims to be objective, but it's based on a leap of faith.

Another style of apologetics is **historical**. Historians use a variety of tools. They piece together findings from archaeology and study old manuscripts to figure out what really happened in ancient times. These days, there are a lot of wild new theories about the origins of Christianity---like what you find in *The DaVinci Code*---and many people believe them. These are not based on good scholarship. The best scholarship supports the reliability of the New Testament. It's good to look at historical evidence, because Christian faith is not based on doctrines or even on Scripture alone. It is based on what God has actually done in history. Our faith is based on historical truth. Good study of history is helps us to better understand our faith.

A third style of apologetics is **inductive**. The inductive approach does not start with the authority of the Bible. You can rely on Scripture when people accept the authority of Scripture. But if someone has no respect for the Bible yet, it may be better to start somewhere else. So we can begin with general observations about the world, about human nature and about society, From these observations, we can build an understanding of what is true. And then we can show that the Bible gives the best explanation for why things are the way they are. One of the best examples of inductive apologetics is the book *Mere Christianity* by C.S. Lewis, which was published in the 1950's. Another book that I really like is *The Everlasting Man* by G.K. Chesterton. This book is older and more difficult to read, but it's full of brilliant observations. This is the book that helped convince C.S. Lewis to become a Christian.

The last three approaches—forensic, historical and inductive—are heavily based on logic and reason. Not all people are intellectual. Even people who are like to take a break from heavy thinking and just enjoy a good story. People are inherently spiritual and can recognize spiritual truth in many different places. You can find spiritual truth in books, stories, films and music. I'm not just talking about Christian books and films and music. Good art is good art, whether it's sacred or secular. The best kind of art reveals something about truth or universal human experience. We can find good spiritual ideas all around us if we know how to look for them. Some people are too nervous to talk about "religion." If you ask them to study the Bible, they will say "No." But they are willing to tell you what they think about a good movie that they saw. Learning how to discuss these things can be very helpful in sharing our faith.

Conclusions

Let me finish up with a few final remarks. People are rational, but rational thinking is only one part of human nature. People need to know that they're right. But they also need to be accepted and loved. They need to be respected. They need to be useful. They need to be part of a community. And they need to be holy and right before God. When we share our faith, we need to recognize all these things. Second, the Christian faith is not the same as agreeing with a set of doctrines or propositions. It's putting our trust in Jesus. It's going beyond our reason and putting out into deep water. And it's the work of the Holy Spirit. No matter what we say and what we do, we cannot change ourselves. We cannot change another person. It's the Holy Spirit that changes people when they meet Jesus and encounter God's word. Here's a good quote that I found. It's written by a former atheist who used to argue strongly against Christians. She said: "For me, Biblical truth wasn't verified through historical accuracy, inerrancy or reliability of the Gospels, because my initial assumptions didn't include these things. I saw divine inspiration in the actual content of the words attributed to Jesus Christ" (www.ex-atheist.com).

I'll close with the words of the Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 8:1-3: "Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. The man who thinks he knows something does not yet know as he ought to know. But the man who loves God is known by God." Study the Bible. Think hard. Read good books. Become a good apologist and be ready to share your faith, But please don't get puffed up.