



The Biblical Mandate for Apologetics

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This is an introduction to the biblical understanding of apologetics. The session deals with a definition of apologetics rooting it firmly as a spiritual exercise indispensable to and indivisible from evangelism.

DEFINING APOLOGETICS

"The trouble with most theologians is that they go down deeper, stay down longer and come up murkier than anyone else I know." Apologetics is not about injecting a dose of confusion into the Christian Gospel to try and make it sound more profound. It is about communicating the profundity of the Gospel so that it removes the confusion surrounding it.

Apologetics is really about evangelism. The word apologetics comes from the Greek word "apologia", which literally means a reasoned defence.

Paul uses the word to describe his own ministry. In Philippians [1:7] he states that he is appointed for the defence and confirmation of the Gospel.

In 1 Peter a command is given that we should always be prepared to give an answer (*apologia*) for the reason for the hope that we have. For both Peter and Paul, they are clearly thinking of evangelism in these contexts.

A Letter to the persecuted Church

"But in your hearts, set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you for the reason for the hope that you have, but do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience..." 1 Pet

3:15 & 16

§ This passionate letter is to the wider church, which is suffering under persecution. Its readers are exhorted to lead holy and obedient lives, an endeavour made possible because of the new birth that has occurred in their lives through the living word of God (1 Pet 1:17-24). Every chapter contains practical instruction as to how we should live and what attitude we should adopt. In the midst of all of this instruction, comes a very clear command - be prepared to give an apologetic for the hope that you have. What then can we learn from this brief text about apologetics?

1. The lordship of Christ: the term "heart" does not just refer to the seat of our feelings, but also of our thoughts. Every part of us needs to be under the authority of Christ.

2. The double-minded man (Book of James): someone trying to look in two different directions. He is caught between two opinions and has not made a commitment either way. In contrast, the man who asks in faith is stable, and his prayers for wisdom are effective. He has been persuaded, and has put his trust into that which is truthful.

3. We should speak from the context of holiness. Our attitude, our actions and how we treat other people is vitally important (1 Pet 3:8 onwards). Even when faced with persecution, evil is not to be repaid with evil. The reason for the persecution is not because Christians are **not** obeying God's commands - it is because they **are** obeying his commands. 1 Pet 3:15 is saying that because our lives and attitudes are different, due to living in obedience to God's commands, people will ask questions as to why and we should therefore be prepared. In other words, there should actually be a demand for an apologetic because of the quality of our lives.

4. The letter of 1 Peter is addressed to the church. The command to give an apologetic is not directed to a handful of carefully selected specialists. The command to give an apologetic is one that is directed to every single member of the body of Christ. No one who is a Christian can excuse themselves.

There is a difference between the process of evangelism and the gift of the evangelist. An evangelist is someone who has the gift of

precipitating a decision in someone's life concerning their standing before Christ. Not everyone has this gift. But we are all involved in the process of evangelism (e.g. asking someone to church). It is precisely in that process that apologetics plays a role. It is not a question of whether we engage in apologetics or not, but what kind of apologetic we give when the opportunity comes by.

5. We need to be prepared. The increasing complexity and diversity of the choices we face in life, coupled with a rapidly changing post-modern society, mean that the easiest course is to run away. However, the Christian is called to an engagement with, not a retreat from, the world.

The word translated "prepared" in the NIV has its root in the idea of being fit. Opportunities to share our faith should not be lost because we haven't taken the time to think through what we would say.

We need to "stop thinking like children," being like infants in regard to evil, while being like adults in our thinking (1 Cor 14:20).

6. We must give answer for the **reason** for the hope that we have. Peter is quite clear: believing that Christ died so that we might be saved is not a *superstition*. Instead there is a reason for the hope that we have - there is a logic behind the Gospel - there are reasons that can be communicated and explained concerning the atonement. We must be ready to give an explanation, a defence, of why the Gospel is true.

7. With the lordship of Christ in our own lives as the starting point for giving an apologetic, any *apologia* must therefore lead to or flow from the cross. The Cross and resurrection provide our hope, and there is no other reason for our confidence.

However, at the same time we must recognise that people may have other legitimate questions that need to be dealt with before they are prepared to give us a hearing. We need to deal with these issues so that we can clear away false ideas. Then Christ can be seen for who he is.

8. Our attitude: The Gospel is to be shared with gentleness and respect. The message that is

brought claims to be one of grace and peace. The Gospel is not to be compromised in any way. But the way we present it must be consistent with its content.

Our confidence rests in the reality of the relationship we enjoy with Christ, the change he has brought into our lives and the truthfulness of his claims. Our confidence is not in a system of thought. It is in the person of Christ. That is why the Apostle Paul says, "I know **whom** I have believed," and not **what** I have believed.

This is why we are also told that we should keep a clear conscience as we talk to others. We are not called on to pretend we know something when we don't. Nor are we boasting of how great our own minds are, as if we had figured out everything by ourselves. With humility, fear of God and honesty, we testify to the truth and reality of the Gospel message, that Christ is still alive.

The Gospel promises to change lives. It is no surprise therefore that people expect to see lives changed. If our attitude indicates that Christ makes no difference to how we live or how we treat others, we immediately undermine its credibility. Ultimately, our goal is not to win arguments, but to see people come to know Christ.

DOING APOLOGETICS

The temptation with apologetics is to offer set answers to set questions. It can be useful to have a structure in mind when dealing with certain issues. However, it is better to have an understanding of how we can effectively engage with people at a conversational level.

Jesus the conversationalist

§ Jesus spends a lot of time talking to people: he interacts with them (John 1-7). Whether he is talking to individuals, small groups or large crowds, there is an immediacy and intimacy in what he does.

Hesitating to join in

§ Perhaps we are uncertain about engaging with some people because we feel we don't have all the answers. The truth is that none of us know exactly what to say all the time. Being a good apologist involves thinking about the *questions* that need to be raised to other people's answers, or even questions that need to be put to the questions themselves.

§ Reading through the four Gospels reveals that Jesus asked well over 100 questions of his critics and his questioners. Why?

Getting people to think

§ Asking a question forces people to think. Thinking is not the enemy of the Christian faith. We consistently see that Jesus asked questions to make people think about what they were saying.

§ Luke 18, "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Instead of saying what the man should believe, Jesus asks: "Why do you call me good?" He replies: "No-one is good but God alone."

§ Getting someone to think reveals their assumptions. Asking questions is frequently a better way to do this than jumping into some kind of detailed rebuttal. In a conversation people are listening to and thinking about what the other person is saying. In an argument, people end up in an automatic response mode.

Exposing contradictions

§ Asking questions is also a gentler way of exposing contradictions, e.g. relativism.

e.g. "There is no such thing as truth. If there was, then I would have a reason to live."

"You say that there is no such thing as truth - tell me, is that statement true?"

§ It is correct to conclude that life must be meaningless if there is no such thing as truth. The faulty assumption made is the belief that the claim "everything is relative" can be meaningfully stated.

§ To state that everything is relative is to make an absolute claim. If it is absolute, then it follows that not everything is relative. Literally, nothing has been said. You run into a similar problem if you

try to deny that there is such a thing as truth. What you are in effect saying is "The truth is, there is no such thing as truth." However, if the statement is true, then there is such a thing as truth. If there is no such thing as truth, then the statement is not true. If it is not true, why believe it? The statement is literally nonsensical, and "nonsense remains nonsense," said C. S. Lewis, "even if you talk it about God!"

Defining the issue

§ Frequently as Christians, we want to jump in with answers to questions without really thinking about the assumptions in people's minds concerning the issue at hand. In Matthew 22, Jesus is asked whether it is right to pay taxes to Caesar or not. Jesus knows that the question is a trap.

Israel was under occupation by the Romans, who were regarded by the Jews as the evil oppressors. To pay taxes, and certainly to collect them, was seen to be strengthening the hand of the enemy. Was not Israel God's chosen people? Was this not their land? Surely to help the Romans was to go against God himself? In the minds of the listeners, if Jesus is going to be on God's side, he is expected to say no. If he says no, it will get back to the authorities, and he will be arrested - which is what the questioners want. If he says yes then he will lose the respect of the people. As far as the questioners are concerned, it is a win / win situation.

But Jesus asks for a coin. "Whose portrait is this?" he asks, "Whose inscription?" "Caesar's," they reply. "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's," Jesus answers. He has redefined the issue at hand: he says it is right to pay taxes, but answers in such a way as to make certain that no one misunderstands what he is saying. Not only is the question answered, but also the sentiment and prejudice lying behind the question.

§ Modern situation, e.g. the question of abortion. The issue is normally phrased in terms of choice - does a woman have the right to choose what happens to her own body? The question, when phrased this way, seems to allow only one answer - yes.

But it is the wrong starting question. The first question is about how to define life: "When does

someone have the right to terminate an innocent person's life?" To answer the question of choice, without first raising the issue about how to define life, is to fall into a trap by failing to effectively communicate with the people listening.

§ Giving the right answer does not rectify the problem of asking the wrong question. The question must first be reformulated before any answer can be given.

Exposing motives

§ Asking questions is also a way of exposing people's motives. Luke 20: did Jesus really want an answer to his own question? His question is designed to reveal their own motives, and their most appropriate response would be an apology for the way that they were treating him.

§ It is important to distinguish between people who like debating games and those who are sincerely interested in the answer. Again, asking a question is the easiest way to do this. "Tell me, if I were to answer this question for you, would you become a Christian?" normally focuses the mind quite quickly.

§ Helping someone to understand their own motives in asking questions gives them a chance to reflect on the importance of what is at hand. We are not involved in evangelism to play games with people. The stakes are too important for that.

Questioning individuals

§ Asking questions gives the person you are talking to the vital opportunity to explain where *they* are coming from and what *they* believe. See Luke 10 and 18: each answer that Jesus gives on eternal life is tailored to the individual he is speaking to.

§ Apologetics can become mechanistic. Although the truth of the Gospel remains constant, we mustn't think that by repeating things we have said to other people in the past, we will automatically get the same response.

MORAL COMPLAINTS AGAINST GOD

What will happen to people who have never heard the Gospel? Why does God allow suffering? These two questions are similar in both being moral complaints against God.

§ Are you saying that so and so went to hell? The answer to this question is that we don't know. We are not in a position to judge who will be in

heaven and who isn't, and it is a mistake to get drawn into that debate. What we do know is that there will be no miscarriages of justice on judgement day. In Rev 19:2 we read that the multitude will declare that God's judgements are true and just: he is the perfect judge.

§ What we can do is assure them that God's judgements will be true and just. But how do they stand? What about someone who is offered forgiveness and then turns it down?

§ First address the problem of love. Many will recognise that the idea of life without love is an abhorrent one. Whether it is expressed in music or in psychology, love is seen as an essential ingredient in life.

Love must be freely given for it to be meaningful. However, if it is capable of being freely given, then it must also be capable of being freely withheld.

If God were to create a world in which love can be expressed and experienced, he must create a world in which humankind has freedom. Not only do we need a world with freedom; we also need a world in which there are *real alternatives* for us to exercise that freedom.

When God created the world, he created one that had freedom in order that it may have love. Yet if we are free to love, then we are also free to do evil. At this stage, anyone who wants to object must somehow demonstrate that it is possible to create a world capable of love and in which there is no freedom. It cannot be done.

We must also remember that choices entail certain consequences. We are free to make our choices, but not free to dictate the consequences. The choices we exercise effect not only ourselves, but also the environment in which we live.

When God created the world, he did not sit back quietly holding his breath hoping that nothing would go wrong, and then react with surprise when it did. The Scriptures talk of the Lamb who was slain from the creation of the world (Rev 13:8, NIV). Not only did God want to create a world that could enjoy love, he knew what would go wrong and was prepared to pay the price to rescue it when it did. And the price was not a trivial one. As a matter of fact, it is the pain and

suffering of the Cross by which that rescue is made possible.

§ See Ravi Zacharias, C.S. Lewis and Alister McGrath.