

WHAT IS APOLOGETICS?

Have you ever had to defend an idea that you held? Have you ever used evidence and offered proof to give a reason for your beliefs? Have you ever pointed out inconsistencies and false claims in beliefs you didn't hold? Have you ever had questions about your own beliefs and searched for answers to see if what you believed was justified? If you answered yes to any of these questions then you've encountered apologetics.

Apologetics simply means to give a defense – to say why you believe what you believe. Originally, apologetics was a legal term that ancient Greeks used to refer to a courtroom defense. Like a courtroom defense, Christian apologetics can be the formal presentation of a case, but it is not restricted to that. Apologetics can also be in casual conversation, in works of art, or simply in the way in which Christians live their lives. Regardless of the form it takes, when we defend the Christian faith we use apologetics in three ways.

First, we argue for the truthfulness of the Christian claims. There are many ways to make a case for Christianity. Some use philosophical arguments such as the Kalam Cosmological argument or the argument from morality. Some use historical evidence, such as the case for the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ or the argument from fulfilled prophecy. Some use scientific evidence, such as the design argument. The case for Christianity can use just one focus or use a number of arguments in conjunction with each other. And as history progresses and advances are made in our knowledge, new ways of defending the faith will continue to arise.

Second, we defend the Christian faith by answering the objections to it when it is challenged. Sometimes it is attacked by people who are openly hostile to it, sometimes the attacks are misunderstandings or mischaracterizations, and sometimes someone simply has an honest question. The important thing in these situations is to listen to the concerns of the individual so you can tailor your defense to speak to them in a way that is relevant to them.

Third, we defend Christianity by showing how all other belief systems are false. In this context, we show that non-Christian claims are incoherent, illogical, and/or not supported by fact. Proving other beliefs to be false does not in itself show Christianity is true. But non-Christian claims are still objections to Christianity and therefore need to be answered.

The goal of each of these aspects of defense is to clear away obstacles that stand between a person and the cross of Christ. And in each of the three areas of apologetics we are, of course, trying to persuade people that Christianity is true. But we are trying to do more than give them reasons to simply agree intellectually. We are not just trying to move them to believe, but to act on their belief, to reorder their lives centered on this truth. This is because Christianity is true, not a personal preference.

The difference between these two things can be the difference between life and death. Picture yourself in a giant supermarket that is fully stocked. But instead of selling food, this supermarket sells religions. The names of the departments are all the same but have taken on different meaning, a symbolic meaning. For example, the meat department sells Judaism, because in the Old Testament the way to receive forgiveness was through animal sacrifice and blood atonement.

Or how about Hinduism? Hinduism might be found in the aisle where you'd find rice since bags of rice have tons of different grains in them and Hinduism has 330,000,000 different gods that are all really part of the same thing, just like rice. Islam is in the natural food section. Natural food is where you find food that doesn't have anything artificial added to it like preservatives. Islam says that the Old Testament and the New Testament has all sorts of stuff added to it and that only the Qu'ran has the pure, original teachings from God. New Age religion is found in the candy section since its really all about making you feel good. Dead religions, beliefs no one holds anymore like Greek mythology are found in the frozen food section. Christianity, with all its scenes in gardens and farming parables, is in the produce department. Buddhists believe that if it doesn't really matter if there is a god or not and that they have the ability to save themselves. So there is a Buddhist sitting in an empty shopping cart pushing himself around the store. And there is a guy who can't find anything in the store at all—an atheist. Some shoppers are strictly vegetarian, some eat only meat, but all the diets are of equal value in store. They all basically do the same thing—feed you something. In charge of the checkout counter is death itself. After you put everything you want in the shopping cart, you pay with your life. Whether there is anything outside the exit door and what happens there is the big question.

Is religion really like this, where you can choose whatever you want to believe and its no better or worse than anyone else's choice? Or is religion something entirely different, like an antidote or a cure?

Instead of a supermarket, picture yourself in an emergency room with a serious illness. The doctor explains that the illness is 100% fatal unless you get a shot of one particular antidote. The doctor also says that recovery from the illness after taking the antidote has a 100% success rate. By saying this, the doctor is telling you that your preferences do not matter at all; they don't count. Whether or not you like to get shots is irrelevant. This particular disease has a particular remedy that can only be given in a particular way. Do it or die.

Because this illness is so serious and because there is only one cure, it is extremely important to go to a doctor who knows what they're talking about. No one having a heart attack wants to go to a doctor who thinks the cure is to put a cast on your leg. You have to have the right treatment no matter how much you don't like it, or how painful it is, or how offensive it is to you. You don't get to go shopping for the treatment you like best. The cure is the cure—period.

If we understand Christianity correctly, we see it is an antidote, not a lifestyle choice or part of a well-balanced religious diet. Jesus is not like cherry flavored cough syrup that we happen to like better than the Buddha lemon flavored cough syrup. Like the antidote, Christianity can be painful and inconvenient. It might not be cool. And it might be offensive. Most of us would much rather treat our religion with a supermarket approach where we always ended up with a religion that fit our lifestyles and that could change as we changed. But we can't live that way because what we need is the truth.

As a result, some Christians see apologetics as pre-evangelism; it is not the gospel but it prepares the soil for the gospel. Others don't make that distinction; they see apologetics and evangelism as deeply entwined facets of the Gospel. Whatever its relation to the Gospel, apologetics is an extremely important enterprise that can profoundly impact unbelievers and be used as the tool that persuades them to put their trust in Jesus Christ.

The Bible has a word for a belief that is based on firm persuasion and conviction. That word is

faith. The word faith is often misused in our culture to mean nothing more than wishing or an irrational hope. Those things refer to mere personal preference, something the biblical concept of faith doesn't have any room for. Some Christians have been suspicious of apologetics or have even rejected it because they see it as being contrary to faith. They think that if Christianity can be a well-reasoned system then there is no room for faith. However, the biblical concept of faith has an object that can be argued for and investigated. Thus, apologetics is obviously a very important part of cultivating faith.

However, we must be careful not to overstate the power and place of apologetics. For all this talk of argument and persuasion, ultimately no one can be argued into the kingdom of God unless the Holy Spirit works to convict them. The Holy Spirit does not need apologetics to do his work. For example, the Apostle Paul was not saved through apologetics, but by direct revelation. However, this is very unusual. The Holy Spirit does frequently use apologetics to do its work. Again think of Paul: when Paul gave a defense of Christianity he did not always point to his miraculous conversion experience. Instead he was able to give philosophical arguments, historical arguments, or evidential arguments depending on his audience and purpose. And many were saved by the work of the Spirit through Paul's apologetics.

That the Holy Spirit chooses to work through apologetics is clear in scripture. In fact, the Bible commands us to do apologetics. For example, Peter tells us to "...always be ready to give a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you (1 Pet 3:15). And Paul says, "We demolish arguments and every high-minded thing that is raised up against the knowledge of God, taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ" (2 Cor 10:4-5). And the idea of apologetics is assumed in the exhortation of Jude 1:3 when he tells believers to "contend earnestly for the faith."

One of the main reasons it is important to recognize the work of the Spirit in apologetics is that all people have a knowledge of God but suppress that truth (Rom 1:18-19). The unbeliever's problem is not fundamentally a lack of information, but a denial of it. This does not mean the unbeliever doesn't have legitimate questions that deserve answers. But, the questions are not ultimately the cause of unbelief. This means that when we do apologetics we are doing more than delivering information; we are revealing self-deceit, and that can be very painful. Giving someone correct information will be worthless unless we heed Paul's words to speak "the truth in love" (Eph 4:15). Our goal as apologists is not to be merely right, but to reveal a righteousness which can be had only through Jesus Christ. As was mentioned earlier, when we give an answer we must address the person asking, and by doing so we minister to them. How we answer a question for one person may be different from the way we answer the same question for another person. The goal is not to have cookie-cutter answers; the goal is to speak the eternal truths of the Gospel into the lives of people in desperate need of the saving work of Christ.

But apologetics isn't used just to engage non-Christians. Apologetics strengthens the faith of Christians by answering questions they have about their own belief. Many Christians did not come to believe as a result of investigating the authority of the Bible, the evidence for the resurrection, or as a response to the philosophical arguments for God's existence. They heard a proclamation of the Gospel and that was enough for them to respond. Although these people have reasons for their belief, they are deeply personal reasons that often do not make sense to unbelievers. They know the truth but are not necessarily equipped to share or articulate the truth in a way that is understandable to those who have questions about their faith. It is quite possible to believe something that is true without having a proper understanding of it or the ability to

articulate it.

But Christians who aren't sure quite why they believe are often only comfortable only around other Christians because of their insecurity. When they encounter challenges to their faith, rather than being defenders they become defensive. As a result, they withdraw from the world and become unable participate in the fulfilling of Christ's Great Commission to "go and make disciples of all nations" (Matt 28:20); they become salt that is never used and a light never turned on. After all, you can't give an answer if you don't have an answer.

The solution to this problem is apologetics - for believers to become informed in doctrine, the history of their faith, philosophy, logic, and other disciplines as they relate to Christianity. We need to know the facts, arguments, theology, and to understand how to employ them in a way that will effectively engage the culture.

How will you answer when a friend of yours says You can't prove God exists? What will your response be when you catch a documentary on T.V. that claims Jesus never lived or that there is no evidence he rose from the dead? When a best-selling book claims that there were many books left out of the Bible that contradict the Bible we have, will you be able to show why the claim is false? If a college professor states that all religions basically teach the same thing will you be able to challenge them? And when a terrorist attack kills thousands of innocent people and you are asked how God could allow such an evil thing to happen, can you give an answer?

When Christians become equipped with apologetics we become able to engage the world without acquiescing to it and without compromise. We become bold and secure in our faith. And we become able to convey the content and meaning of our deep convictions and experiences to others in a way that appeals to more than personal experience. With apologetics we will be able to glorify God by giving a defense to anyone who asks us for a reason for the hope that is in us.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

Apologetics Study Bible Articles:

What is Apologetics? by Kenneth Boa, xxv.

How Apologetics Changed My Life! by Lee Strobel, xxvi.

Doug Powell, *The Holman QuickSource Guide to Christian Apologetics*

Chapter 1, What is Apologetics?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. As a Christian, what questions do you have the most trouble answering?
2. What other Bible verses encourage apologetics? (cf. Acts 22:1; Phil 1:7,16; Col 2:4; Eph 4:25; Col 2:8)
3. How would you respond to someone who shies away from apologetics saying, "You just have to have faith"?
4. Has anyone you know come to faith through apologetics? If yes, what's the story? If no, what does that say about the usefulness of apologetics?
5. What other religions can you think of that make claims that can be investigated? (Islam? Mormonism? Buddhism?)

