

INTRODUCTION TO CHRISTIAN APOLOGETICS

What Is Christian Apologetics?

Christian apologetics is that branch of Christian theology that seeks to provide a rational justification for Christianity's truth claims.

- A. It's a theoretical discipline
- B. Divisions of apologetics
 - 1. Offensive (positive)
 - a. Natural theology
 - b. Christian evidences
 - 2. Defensive (negative)
 - a. Objections to Theism
 - b. Objections to Christianity

Why Study Christian Apologetics?

Shaping Culture

1. *Shaping culture.* Apologetics is extremely valuable, and may even be necessary, if the Gospel is to be effectively heard in Western society today. Our Western culture has become deeply post-Christian. It is the product of the Enlightenment, which was a movement in 17th and 18th century Europe that threw off the institutional church and the monarchy in the name of free thought, that is to say, the pursuit of truth by unbridled human reason alone, unfettered by the authority of church or state. Now it is by no means inevitable that such free thought has to lead to atheistic conclusions – Antony Flew is an example of someone who claimed that he pursued free thought, followed the evidence where it leads, and he came to believe in God. Nevertheless, the overwhelming impact of the Enlightenment mentality on Western culture has been that Western intellectuals generally do not consider theological knowledge to be possible. Theology is not a source of genuine knowledge, and therefore theology is not a science. “Science” comes from the Latin

word *scientia*, which means knowledge. Theology is not a science, it is not a source of knowledge, and therefore reason and religion are at odds with each other. The deliverances of the physical sciences alone are taken to be the arbiter of truth. And the confident assumption by Western secularists is that if you follow reason unflinchingly towards its end, then you will arrive at a purely naturalistic picture of the world, a picture which will be atheistic or at best agnostic.

Now why are these considerations of culture important? Very simply, because *the Gospel is never heard in isolation*. It is always heard against the cultural backdrop in which a person is raised. A person who is raised in a culture in which the Gospel is still an intellectually viable option for thinking men and women will be open to the Gospel in the way that a secularized person will not. To give an example, suppose that you were approached on the street by a devotee of the Hari Krishna movement, with his shaved head and saffron robes, and he invited you to believe in Krishna. You would probably think such an invitation was bizarre, freakish, maybe even funny. But if a person on the streets of New Delhi or Mumbai were to have such an encounter, that invitation would probably be taken very seriously and give him serious cause for reflection. Why? Because it is culturally accepted in India to have Hindu beliefs, whereas in our culture it is not.

What awaits us here in North America if our slide into secularism remains unchecked is already previewed in Europe. Although the majority of Europeans still maintain a nominal affiliation with Christianity, only about 10% of Europeans are practicing believers, and less than half of those are evangelical believers. The most significant trend in European religious affiliation has been the growth of those classed as non-religious. It went from effectively 0% of the population in 1900 to over 22% today. As a result evangelism is immeasurably more difficult in Europe than it is here in the United States. As one who has lived for 13 years in Europe and spoken at European universities, both in eastern and western Europe, I can testify how hard the ground is. Missionaries have to work for years to just win a handful of converts. The problem is, of course, that they are working in a cultural milieu in

which the Gospel is just not taken seriously as an intellectual option. For that reason people who depreciate the value of apologetics because “Nobody comes to Christ through arguments” don’t understand the wider picture. It is the broader task of Christian apologetics to create a cultural milieu in which the Gospel can still be heard as a legitimate option for thinking people. People may not come to Christ through the arguments, but the arguments give them *permission* to believe, as it were – the intellectual permission to believe when their hearts are moved by the preaching of the Gospel and by the Holy Spirit.

In his article, “Christianity and Culture,” the great Princeton theologian J. Gresham Machen wrote,

False ideas are the greatest obstacles to the reception of the gospel. We may preach with all the fervor of a reformer and yet succeed only in winning a straggler here and there, if we permit the whole collective thought of the nation or of the world to be controlled by ideas which, by the resistless force of logic, prevent Christianity from being regarded as anything more than a harmless delusion.¹

Unfortunately, Machen’s warning (which was issued in 1913) went unheeded, and biblical Christianity retreated into the closets of fundamentalism and cultural isolationism. It withdrew from the academy and society at large. It has only been in recent decades that we’ve begun to re-emerge.

Now, I believe, we are living at a time in history when huge doors of opportunity stand open before us. We are living at a time when Christian philosophy is undergoing a veritable renaissance, which has revitalized natural theology, or arguments for the existence of God. We’re living at a time when modern science is more open to the existence of a transcendent Creator and Designer of the universe than at any time in recent memory. And we’re living at a time when biblical criticism has largely established the credibility of the outlines of the New Testament life of Jesus, so that the Gospels are now regarded once again as serious historical sources for the life of Christ. This is a tremendously exciting

¹ J. Gresham Machen, “Christianity and Culture,” *Princeton Theological Review* 11 (1913): p. 7.

time to be alive and working in apologetics. I think that we're well poised intellectually to regain lost ground and to help reshape our culture in such a way that the Gospel can be heard as a legitimate option for people today.

Now some of you may be thinking, "But don't we live in a postmodern culture in which these appeals to rational arguments and evidence are no longer effective? Since postmodernists deny the objectivity of truth and logic and rationality, these arguments and apologetic evidences aren't effective. Rather in a postmodern culture we should simply share our narrative and invite people to participate in it."

I think that this kind of thinking represents a disastrous misdiagnosis of Western culture. The idea that we live in a postmodern culture is a myth which is propagated in our churches by misguided youth ministers. In fact, a postmodern culture, when you think about it, is an impossibility. It would be utterly unlivable. Nobody is a postmodernist when it comes to reading the labels on a bottle of aspirin and a box of rat poison. If you've got a headache, you better believe that texts have objective meaning! So when you talk to people, you'll find that they are not postmodernist about matters of science and technology and engineering. They are relativistic and pluralistic when it comes to matters of religion and ethics – but that's not postmodernism, that's modernism! That is exactly the modernistic view according to which science gives us the truth about natural reality, and things that cannot be proved by science, like ethics and religion, are just expressions of personal taste and emotive feelings. We live in a culture which remains deeply modernist at its core.

In fact, I think that postmodernism is one of the craftiest deceptions that Satan has yet devised. "Modernism is dead!" he says, "Ignore it! You don't need to fear modernism any longer." Meanwhile modernism, pretending to be dead, comes back around in a fancy, new costume in the guise of postmodernism. And Satan says to us, "Your old arguments are no longer effective against this new challenger! Lay them down, they're of no use, just share your narrative!" And so we lay aside voluntarily our best weapons of logic and evidence and have nothing left to commend

the *truth* of what we share. If the church adopts this strategy, then what will happen in the next generation is that Christianity will be reduced to just one more voice in a cacophony of competing voices, each one sharing its own narrative and none commending itself as the objective truth about reality. Truth will be given to us by scientific naturalism, which will continue to shape our culture's view of how the world *really* is.

So I think that the idea that we live in a postmodern culture and that we must therefore abandon rational apologetics and evidence is a suicidal prescription for the church. Now, of course, it goes without saying that in doing apologetics, we need to be relational and humble and invitational rather than argumentative and mean-spirited and offensive. We saw that 1 Peter 3:15 says that we should share the reasons for the hope within us with gentleness and respect. You don't have to be a postmodernist to exemplify those kinds of biblical virtues.

So I find that it's very important that we not allow ourselves to be deceived into thinking that we no longer live in a modernist culture in which it is vital to present a rational case for the objective truth of the Christian Gospel. I think that we *do* live in a modernist culture and that it is vital that we shape our culture in such a way as to preserve a milieu in which the Gospel can be heard as a legitimate option today. So the first role of apologetics is shaping culture.

Strengthening Believers

2. *Strengthening believers.* The second reason to study apologetics is for strengthening believers. Apologetics is not only vital in shaping our culture, but it's also vital in the lives of individual persons. I think one of those individual roles will be strengthening Christian believers.

When I was studying for my doctoral exams in theology, Jan and I lived for a summer in Berlin in Germany. While we were there, we were visited by Ann Kiemel and her new husband Will. Now those of you who remember Ann will know that she was an extremely sentimental and emotional women's speaker. She would speak to large groups of women audiences and in a matter of minutes would have them all

reduced to tears by her stories and anecdotes that she told. She was a unique person – she would meet total strangers and sing to them little ditties about the Lord and share her little stories with them and lead them to Christ. She would tell story after story how even hard-boiled academics would be melted by her little ditties and stories and would be brought to the Lord.

Well, as we were sitting around the dinner table one evening in the apartment in Berlin, I thought I'd profit a little from her experience as a speaker. So I said to her, "Ann, how do you prepare for your messages?"

She said, "Oh, I don't prepare."

I said, "You don't prepare?!"

And she said, "No."

I said, "Well, then, what do you do?"

And she said, "Oh, I just share my struggles."

I thought, *She just shares her struggles! Here I am killing myself in years of study to earn this doctorate in theology in Germany – and she doesn't prepare!* This really shook me because there was no denying the effectiveness of her ministry. I thought, *Am I just barking up the wrong tree? Is all of this study a waste of time? Why am I doing all this study when all I have to do is share my struggles?*

Well, we returned to the States that fall to do a sabbatical at the University of Arizona in Tucson, where a former classmate lived. I shared with him one day about how my conversation with Ann had sort of taken the wind out of my sails. He said something to me that was very reassuring. He said, "Bill, someday those people that Ann Kiemel has brought to the Lord are going to need what you have to offer." And I thought, *Yes, that is exactly right!* Emotional experiences can only carry you so far, and then you are going to need something more substantive to back it up. Apologetics can help to provide some of that substance.

When I travel around the country speaking in various churches, I meet parents all the time who come up to me after the service and say something like this: "Oh, if only you had been here two or three years

ago! Our son (or our daughter) had questions about the faith which no one could answer. And now he (or she) is far from the Lord.” It just breaks my heart to meet parents like this. The fact is that our Christian high school students and college students are intellectually assaulted in secular high school and university by overwhelming relativism conjoined with every manner of non-Christian philosophy. We dare not send these kids out to battle armed with rubber swords and plastic armor. We need to prepare our kids for war. That’s why I’m so glad for those of you who are high school students that are in this class. I value your presence in this class, and I value the presence of any of you who are parents of young children because I’m convinced we’ve got to train our children in apologetics from the youthful age up. Begin simple, get more profound as they grow. It’s not enough anymore to just read Bible stories to our kids. They need doctrine, and they need apologetics. I have to tell you the truth: I find it very difficult to understand how parents today can risk having children without having had some training in Christian apologetics. I think it’s that important! So strengthening believers is one way in which apologetics can also be of help.

Evangelizing Unbelievers

3. *Evangelizing unbelievers.* The third reason to study apologetics is for evangelizing unbelievers. I think most people would agree that apologetics is useful in strengthening believers, but many will say that apologetics isn’t any good in evangelism. “Nobody comes to Christ through arguments!” I don’t know how many times I’ve heard this said.

Now this dismissive attitude towards apologetics is certainly not the biblical view. As you read the Acts of the Apostles, you discover that it was the standard procedure of people like Paul to argue for the truth of the Christian faith. He would go into the synagogue, and he would argue with them, trying to persuade them that Jesus was the Messiah. He would rent the Hall of Tyrannus and for two years deliver daily lectures there, debating and arguing with anyone who would come to hear him speak. So the apostles were not at all afraid to argue for the truth of the Christian faith. That doesn’t mean they didn’t trust the Holy Spirit to bring people to Christ. Rather it means they trusted the Holy Spirit to

use their arguments and evidence to help bring people to Christ.

I think that those who believe that apologetics is not effective in evangelism just frankly haven't done enough evangelism. I think that they probably tried sharing the arguments a few times, and they were unsuccessful. So then they draw this sweeping conclusion that apologetics isn't useful in evangelism. I think they are just victims of false expectations. When you think that only a minority of people who hear the Gospel will respond to it affirmatively and that only a minority of those who do so will do so for intellectual reasons, we shouldn't be surprised that most people will not be convinced by our apologetic arguments, just as they are not convinced by the preaching of the cross. So we shouldn't have the expectation that the unbeliever is just going to roll over and play dead when he hears our great apologetic case for Christianity. Of course, he's going to argue back! Think of what is at stake for him! Think of what you are asking him to do! So we should not be surprised when we meet resistance.

Now you might say, "But then why bother with that minority of a minority with whom apologetic arguments are effective?" Well, first of all because every person is precious to God. Every person is a person for whom Christ died. Like a missionary who was called to reach some obscure people group, the Christian apologist feels burdened to reach that minority of persons who will respond to intellectual argument and evidence. But secondly – and here I think the case differs radically from the obscure people group – this people group that can be reached through apologetics, though small in numbers, is huge in influence. Just think of the influence a man like C.S. Lewis has had! He was one of those people. Think of the reverberation that that one man's conversion continues to have! I find that the people who resonate most with my own apologetic work tend to be engineers, doctors (or people in the medical profession), teachers, and lawyers. These are some of the most influential people in our culture today. So reaching this minority will have a huge impact for the kingdom of God.

In any case, the general conclusion that apologetics is ineffective in evangelism is just hasty and overdrawn. Lee Strobel remarked to me that

he has lost count of the number of people that have come to Christ through his books, *The Case for Christ* and *The Case for Faith*. I believe that when you share your personal testimony and are prepared to give good answers and evidence for what you believe, the Spirit of God will use you to draw people to himself. I've seen it happen myself all the time when I speak on university campuses.

Summary and Conclusion

So to wrap up this section of the Introduction to Christian doctrine and apologetics, I think that Christian apologetics is a vital part of Christian discipleship. It helps to shape the broader culture in which we live so as to make the Gospel an option for thinking people, it strengthens believers in their faith, and it is also useful in evangelizing unbelievers. For all of these reasons I am unapologetically enthusiastic about Christian apologetics!

In this class we'll be studying Christian doctrine, and then as we confront apologetic issues along the way, we'll take an excursion and discuss what good reasons (or objections) there are for that Christian doctrine and then resume our study of doctrine.