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SECOND  
EDITION

CHRISTIAN

APOLOGETICS

A COMPREHENSIVE  
CASE FOR BIBLICAL FAITH



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# THE BIBLICAL BASIS FOR APOLOGETICS

IS THE CHRISTIAN WORLDVIEW TRUE and rational? Is it worth believing and living out? Within these questions resides the discipline of Christian apologetics. It offers answers based on rational arguments, yet these arguments can never be divorced from the apologist's personal character. Therefore, apologetics is necessarily both theoretical and personal, both intellectual and relational. Along with the method of the apologetic argument comes the manner of the apologist himself. Both are equally vital, as we will see.

The task in this chapter is to tighten up our understanding of apologetics by explaining its basis in Scripture. After these basics are battened down and the course charted, we can launch out into intellectual adventures argument by argument in the chapters that follow.

## THE MEANING OF APOLOGETICS AND ITS BIBLICAL BASIS

The word *apologetics* is often used today in a derogatory way to mean a biased and belligerent advocacy of an indefensible position. Yet the idea of presenting a credible “apology” for a legitimate position or viewpoint has a long and rich history. For example, the American founders presented an apology (or apologetic) for what would become the American form of government in the *Federalist Papers*. These learned and eloquent apologists explained and rationally defended a political perspective in the face of objections. Socrates famously defended himself against criminal charges in the *Apology*. An apologist, then, is a defender and an advocate for a particular position. There are apologists aplenty for all manner of religion and irreligion. The position is not reserved for Christians or other religionists. Richard Dawkins, for example, is a tireless apologist for atheistic Darwinism and, as such, an equally tireless opponent of all religion, but particularly of Christianity.<sup>1</sup> While apologists may resort to propaganda or even

<sup>1</sup>We will return to Dawkins's attacks on Christianity later in the book, particularly in chapters 14 and 15.

coercion in order to win approval for their positions, they need not do so. Of course, the Christian, following Christ's example, must never do so.

Christian apologetics is the rational defense of the Christian worldview as objectively true, rationally compelling, and existentially or subjectively engaging. The word *apologetics* comes from the Greek word *apologia*, which can be translated as “defense” or “vindication.” In the days of the New Testament “an apology was a formal courtroom defense of something (2 Tim 4:16).”<sup>2</sup> The word, in either the noun form *apologia* or the verb form *apologeomai*, appears eight times in the New Testament (Acts 22:1; 25:16; 1 Cor 9:3; 2 Cor 7:11; Phil 1:7, 16; 2 Tim 4:16; 1 Pet 3:15). The term is used specifically for a rational defense of the gospel in three texts: Philippians 1:7, 16, and most famously in 1 Peter 3:15-16.<sup>3</sup>

But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer [*apologia*] to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander.

Peter writes to strengthen Christians who are suffering for their faith. The reason they can endure and even find hope in suffering is Jesus himself. But simply saying “Jesus” when someone asks why you have hope in times of suffering is to fail to give a full apologetic. Although this passage does not directly address the whole scope of apologetics, it does encourage believers to articulate the reason for their Christian confidence. In light of this, we should also explain why we believe in Jesus in the first place; that is, why Jesus is our sufficient comfort and inspiration for difficult conditions.

Apostolic authority bids us to give a reason for our hope with “gentleness and respect”—two qualities usually absent from disputes about religion (and politics). In an astute book about Christ-like gentleness, Mary Ann Froelich defines gentleness as “a conscious decision to temper one’s knowledge, skills, authority, or power with kindness and compassion” and argues that Jesus ministry was characterized by this virtue.<sup>4</sup> By following the Master, one can become, like him, “a gentle powerhouse.”<sup>5</sup>

Apologetics defends the defining Christian truth claims against various challenges from unbelievers (see chap. 6). This definition of apologetics invokes both

<sup>2</sup>L. G. Whitlock Jr., “Apologetics,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter Elwell (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1984), 68.

<sup>3</sup>See Kenneth Boa and Robert Bowman, *Faith Has Its Reasons: An Integrative Approach to Defending Christianity*, 2nd ed. (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2005), 2.

<sup>4</sup>Mary Ann Froelich, *Courageous Gentleness: Following Christ's Example of Restrained Strength* (Grand Rapids, MI: Discovery House, 2014), 13.

<sup>5</sup>Froelich, *Courageous Gentleness*, 23.

rational legitimacy (objective truth) and emotional appeal (subjective attractiveness). As such, it harks back to Pascal's programmatic comment on his own never-finished apologetic project.<sup>6</sup>

Men despise religion. They hate it and are afraid it may be true. The cure for this is first to show that religion is not contrary to reason, but worthy of reverence and respect. Next make it attractive, make good men wish it were true, and then show that it is. Worthy of reverence because it really understands human nature. Attractive because it promises true good.<sup>7</sup>

Many people are, at least initially, wary or even resentful of Christianity—its demand for faith, humility, submission to divine authority, willingness to sacrifice for the Christian cause, repentance (meaning the end of indifference and hedonism), and so on. They fear that if it is true, they are on the hook, and if they submit to its terms, their lives will get worse. But if it is true and they fail to submit, God will get them in the end.<sup>8</sup> The antidote to this conundrum is to defend Christianity's core claims rationally in order to show that Christianity is indeed objectively true. But more than this, apologetics needs to demonstrate that Christian truth is winsome because it explains who we are and how we can flourish as creatures in this life and beyond, if we are reconciled to our Creator.

But apologetics is offered not only in response to the doubts and denials of non-Christians.<sup>9</sup> It also fortifies believers in their faith, whether they are wrestling with doubts and questions or simply seeking a deeper grounding for their biblical beliefs. When John the Baptist was in prison and wondering whether Jesus was truly the Messiah, as John had previously proclaimed, Jesus provided evidence of his identity as the Messiah. Jesus did not rebuke John's questions but answered him by listing his unique credentials as the Messiah who supernaturally fulfilled prophecies from the Hebrew Scriptures (Mt 11:1-11). One reason Christianity has failed to exert much influence on the major intellectual institutions of America is that too many Christians hold their beliefs in an uninformed and precarious fashion. Instead of pursuing answers to the toughest questions an unbelieving

<sup>6</sup>For an explanation of Pascal's apologetic efforts, see Douglas Groothuis, "The Character and Plan of the *Pensées*," in *On Pascal* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2003).

<sup>7</sup>Blaise Pascal, *Pensées* 12/187, ed. and trans. Alban Krailsheimer (New York: Penguin, 1966), 34. The first number (12) refers to the Lafuma enumeration used in the Penguin edition; the second number (187) refers to the older Brunschvicg system, used, for example, in the Great Books edition. This convention will be used throughout this book.

<sup>8</sup>This prudential concern is appropriate and will be discussed in chap. 8.

<sup>9</sup>For an excellent treatment of the problem of Christian doubt, see Os Guinness, *God in the Dark* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006); Gary Habermas, *Why Is God Ignoring Me? What to Do When It Feels Like He's Giving You the Silent Treatment* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale, 2010).

world can marshal, they attempt to preserve certainty through ignorance and isolation, relying on platitudes rather than arguments.

Near the end of his noteworthy apologetics book, *The God Who Is There*, Francis Schaeffer chides and challenges his Christian readers:

When we understand our calling, it is not only true, but beautiful—and it should be exciting. It is hard to understand how an orthodox, evangelical, Bible-believing Christian can fail to be excited. The answers in the realm of the intellect should make us overwhelmingly excited. But more than this, we are returned to a personal relationship with the God who is there. If we are unexcited Christians, we should go back and see what is wrong.<sup>10</sup>

Enthusiasm at the prospect of knowing and advocating Christian truth does not exclude rational rigor. The apologist, in fact, cannot substitute bare emotional fervor for intellectual acumen and hard study. Rather, they should work hand in hand.

### **APOLOGETICS' RELATIONSHIP TO THEOLOGY AND PHILOSOPHY**

Apologetics is linked to theology, philosophy, and evangelism, but it is not reducible to any one of these disciplines. The conceptual content of apologetics depends on theology, the goal of which is to systematically and coherently articulate the truth claims of the Bible according to various topics, such as the doctrine of God, salvation, and Christ. The apologist who has a strong commitment to the truth of Scripture endeavors to defend what Scripture teaches, and nothing less. Therefore, the discipline of apologetics requires skill in reading the Bible aright, since one would not want to defend something not warranted by Scripture, which is the ultimate authority when properly interpreted by the principles of logic and hermeneutics (the philosophy of interpreting documents).

***Apologetics and biblical interpretation.*** Bad biblical interpretation can make Christianity look bad. The influential *New York Times* columnist Nicholas Kristoff, who is not a scholar of religion, began a book review in the *New York Times Book Review* by quoting the apostle Paul: “I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man; she must be quiet.” He then writes that scholars “suspect that this was actually written by some grump other than St. Paul, but such sexist passages are sometimes used by conservative Christians to justify the subjugation of women—and by secular liberals to portray the Bible as outdated.”<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup>Francis A. Schaeffer, *The God Who Is There*, 30th anniv. ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 190.

<sup>11</sup>Nicholas Kristoff, “Faith and Reasons,” *New York Times Book Review* (December 1, 2019), 1.

Karen Armstrong, however, has come to the rescue by giving a third way for interpreting the Bible and other holy books. Her book, *The Lost Art of Scripture*,<sup>12</sup> Kristoff claims, provides a deeper understanding of Scripture that goes beyond both fundamentalism and dismissive secularism. Holy books must not be read *literally*, but in other more spiritually creative ways. If so, one can preserve a holy meaning without endorsing things like the subjection of women (Christianity and Islam) and the persecution of the infidels (Islam). Armstrong's large volume gives us this interpretive key, Kristoff claims.

Armstrong is a perennialist, who believes that all religions at their core teach that God is an unknowable oneness beyond language.<sup>13</sup> Thus, her hermeneutic will bend Scriptures in that direction when needed. However, it is not needed if a text is straightforwardly nondualist, such as some passages from the Hindu Upanishads.

Kristoff's favorable review highlights the role of hermeneutics (the philosophy of interpreting documents) in apologetics. Texts from the Bible are often dismissed as out and out wrong (as in female subjection) or are interpreted in a way that dishonors the nature of the text itself. In Paul's passage about women (1 Tim 2:12), a proper hermeneutic considers Paul's context, his original audience, and his teachings on women in the rest of this writings. One should also consider the Bible's overall teaching on gender. With any writing, a text taken out of context is a pretext for error. Given these considerations, far from laying down a universal restriction on women teaching, Paul is, rather, handling a particular problem of false women teachers at Ephesus at that time. He recognizes and encourages women to teach and lead in other settings.<sup>14</sup>

But however one addresses Paul's statement quoted by Kristoff, it raises the question of properly interpreting the Bible in order that apologists know what they ought to defend. Part of apologetics is defending what ought to be defended and what ought not be defended, since the Bible does not, in fact, teach this. So, apologists need to be solid interpreters of Scripture. The apostle Peter warns his readers that some have "twisted" the letters of the apostle Paul and have done so to their own destruction" (2 Pet 3:16).<sup>15</sup> Reading Scripture wrongly is serious business before God, according to Jesus:

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<sup>12</sup>Karen Armstrong, *The Lost Art of Scripture: Rescuing Sacred Texts* (New York: Knopf, 2019).

<sup>13</sup>See the discussion of perennialism in chapter 29.

<sup>14</sup>See Rebecca Merrill Groothuis, *Good News for Women* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1997) and Cynthia Westfall, *Paul and Gender: Reclaiming the Apostle's Vision for Men and Women in Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2016).

<sup>15</sup>See James Sire, *Scripture Twisting: 20 Ways Cults Misinterpret the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1980).

Then some Pharisees and teachers of the law came to Jesus from Jerusalem and asked, “Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? They don’t wash their hands before they eat!”

Jesus replied, “And why do you break the command of God for the sake of your tradition? For God said, ‘Honor your father and mother’ and ‘Anyone who curses their father or mother is to be put to death.’ But you say that if anyone declares that what might have been used to help their father or mother is ‘devoted to God,’ they are not to ‘honor their father or mother’ with it. Thus you nullify the word of God for the sake of your tradition.” (Mt 15:1-6)

Apologists dare not “nullify the word of God” for the sake of tradition or because of bad interpretation or for any other reason. Like Jesus, we need to flush out misunderstandings of Scripture in order to defend the truth of the Bible. Chapter eight takes up some false appropriations of Scripture. But let us here consider some essential considerations for the proper interpretation of the Bible.<sup>16</sup>

First is the question of *translating* the Bible. Craig Blomberg’s chapter in this book defends the New Testament documents as historically reliable and that they have been accurately translated over all. I only want to add that to interpret the Bible properly—in order to defend what it means by what it says—one needs to consider three basic philosophies of translation.

Translations such as the King James Version, New American Standard Bible, and the English Standard Version take a *word-for-word* approach as much as possible and do not explain the significance of some figures of speech that may be foreign to modern readers. The *dynamic equivalent* approach, used in the New International Version, will sometimes explain a figure of speech instead of literally translating it. A paraphrase, such as the Living Bible, the New Living Translation, or *The Message*, does not strive for word-for-word accuracy or dynamic equivalence, but rather the sense of a passage using contemporary idioms.

In studying the Bible to discern its meaning, it is best to read the original biblical languages of Hebrew, Greek, and Aramaic. However, consulting several translations in comparison is helpful to understanding. As Miles Coverdale wrote in 1538 about the Paris edition of his translation of the New Testament into Latin and English,

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<sup>16</sup>For a thorough treatment of this issue, see William W. Klein, Craig L. Blomberg, and Robert L. Hubbard, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2017). On the use of study Bibles, see Douglas Groothuis, “An Informal Guide to Study Bibles,” Douglas Groothuis website, <https://douglasgroothuis.com/2016/04/06/an-informal-guide-to-study-bibles>.



For if thou open thine eyes and consider well the gift of the Holy Ghost therein, thou shall see that one translation declareth, openeth and illustrateth another and that in many cases is a plain commentary unto another.<sup>17</sup>

And by learning the basic principles of interpretation the original meaning the author intended can usually be recovered, understood, and believed. The Bible is not a closed book to those who want to open it (Ps 119; Heb 4:12).

Second, the question of taking the Bible *literally* is usually dogged by unacknowledged confusion if not obfuscation. The Bible depicts Jesus as lamb and a lion in the book of Revelation. No one takes this to mean that Jesus transmogrified into a lamb or a lion (or some combination) after his ascension when the events of the Apocalypse get cranked up. The issue is not about taking the Bible *literarily* but taking the Bible *seriously* given the different kinds of literature it presents. To interpret the resurrection of Jesus metaphorically instead of historically (or literally) would be a grave error.<sup>18</sup> But to take one of Jesus' parables as a historical event would be mistaken as well.

Third, apologists must root their understanding of biblical texts in the intent and cultural background of the original author, as much as this can be discerned. Texts may have implications and assumptions beyond what the authors explicitly state, but the essential meaning of any text is found in the ideas that the author was attempting to convey. When I receive a written card from a friend, I want to know what he was trying to communicate. I want to know his mind on the matters at hand. I should not view his card—or any other written document, whether the Constitution or the liner notes to a sound recording—as a wax nose that I can twist in any direction I want. When you consult a recipe to prepare a dish, you want to know what the cook had in mind. You may improvise in your culinary skills, but you must first read the recipe as it was intended to be written.

Divine inspiration does not contradict this principle, since God works through human authors in their own literary, personal, and historical contexts. The Spirit directed the authors to write what they wrote when they wrote it and for their original audience (2 Pet 1:20-21). God, having made humans in his image and likeness (Gen 1:26), does not shy away from employing human words—whether spoken or written—to make his truth known. We can never directly read the mind of God or know truth exhaustively; but we may plumb the meaning of God's chosen author in a book in the Bible.

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<sup>17</sup>Quoted in Curtis Vaughn, gen. ed., *The New Testament in 26 Translations* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1966), unnumbered first page of introduction.

<sup>18</sup>See chapter 27 in this volume.

This third point means that any postmodern or deconstructionist readings of the Bible are ruled out in principle. Texts are not elastic in their meaning nor does the reader give a text its meaning.<sup>19</sup> Rather, the *objective otherness* of the text should be accepted as a challenge for understanding. If I try to discern the meaning of a painting, I don't bring a paint brush with me. If I try to discern the meaning of a poem, I don't bring white-out with me.

Fourth, recognizing the *genre* of a biblical books is crucial for fathoming their meaning. For example, a proverb from the book of Proverbs is a generalization that gives us a wise orientation to life. "Work hard and you will prosper" is a repeated theme in Proverbs. But we know from our life experiences and from Ecclesiastes that this is not a sure-fire recipe for success, since hard work and talent often go unrewarded in our fallen world "under the sun" (Eccles 9:11). Still, Proverbs gives good advice on many topics.

To take another example, the four Gospels recount the life and teachings of Jesus. Each book is written by a different author and has different audiences in mind. They all address the life of Jesus, and want to get the facts straight for the good of their respective readers (Lk 1:1-4; Jn 21:25). But when we come to an epistle (a letter written by an apostle to a church or to all churches), the literary situation changes, since these letters are occasioned by certain questions and problems in the early church, whether in Corinth or Ephesus. Thus, some of the instructions given may be time-bound (although not arbitrary). When Peter says, "Greet one another with a kiss of love" (1 Pet 5:14), we need not take that as a universal command about kissing in the church. Rather, it was a sign of love and acceptance that has its analogs today in a handshake or an embrace. Thus, we apply the underlying intention of the author, not how he applied that meaning in his first-century culture.<sup>20</sup>

Fifth, since the one and true God is the primary author of the Bible, all the affirmation of Scripture agree with one another, and all are true. This is known as "the analogy of faith"—the Bible interprets the Bible. For example, a statement in Luke will not contradict a statement in Revelation. When critics claim that "the Bible contradicts itself," we must ask what the critic has in mind and then consider the basis of the charge. When the apostle James says that we are justified by works and not by faith alone (Jas 2:14-26), on the surface it seems that he is contradicting Paul's teaching that justification is by faith alone (Eph 2:8). A closer look reveals

<sup>19</sup>See Donald Williams, "Whose Interpretation Is It Anyway?," *Christian Research Journal* 42, no. 2 (2019), 6-7. On the objectivity of truth, see chapters 6-7 in this volume.

<sup>20</sup>Thanks to my colleague William Klein for this sentence and for his helpful comments on this hermeneutics section.

that James is speaking of the *verification or confirmation of our faith* when he speaks of works. Good works demonstrate that a true faith is at work in the believer. Paul likewise writes that faith will produce good works (Eph 2:10). Thus, there is no contradiction, and the critic's mouth is shut (for now).

Sixth, sound biblical interpretation requires an open heart and a sound mind, both of which should be grounded in the power of God himself, who is the God of all truth. To that end, we must beseech God for the skills and humility to read and heed his Word aright and then get busy consulting the proper experts and developing hermeneutical skills. Isaiah said, "Hear the word of the LORD, you who tremble at his word" (Is 66:5). I am not advocating a mystical-magical method by which the Holy Spirit tells us things that are not objectively in the text. On the contrary, the Spirit answers to the Word, since the Word is "God-breathed" (2 Tim 3:16). That same Holy Spirit who inspired the Scripture can, through the principles I have given, illuminate us as to its objective meaning and particular application.

***Apologetics and philosophy.*** Apologetics is an aspect of the philosophy of religion (broadly understood), which is the rational investigation of religious truth claims. Certainly, one may engage in the philosophy of religion as a critic of Christianity (such as William Rowe, Michael Martin, or Graham Oppy) or as an advocate of the Buddhist or Islamic worldviews. However, the Christian apologist employs the tools of the philosophy of religion in service of the Christian worldview.

While apologetics in one sense may be considered a branch of theology, it also walks arm in arm with philosophy. The definition of philosophy is not easy to stuff into a nutshell, but I suggest that philosophy, whatever else it might be, is the investigation of significant truth claims through rational analysis.<sup>21</sup> In that light, the necessary and sufficient conditions for being a philosopher (whether good or bad, major or minor, employed or unemployed) are a strong and lived-out inclination to pursue truth about philosophical matters through the rigorous use of human reasoning and to do so with some intellectual facility.

A Christian-qua-apologist, then, must be a good philosopher (even if not a professional philosopher). This is nonnegotiable and indispensable. As a logical and persuasive discipline, the connection of apologetics to philosophy is vital. Those who do not yet believe the Bible typically are not interested in expositions of biblical doctrine per se. Of more pertinence to the unbeliever is whether the arguments under consideration are rationally compelling.

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<sup>21</sup>For a detailed Christian reflection on the meaning of philosophy, see J. P. Moreland and William Lane Craig, "Argument and Logic," in *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2017).

***Apologetics and evangelism.*** The defense of Christianity as objectively true, rationally compelling, and subjectively engaging also plays a leading role in evangelism. Many leading evangelists, such as Billy Graham, make almost no use of apologetics; but Graham did not disparage apologetics. On the other hand, I once spoke with a gifted evangelist who could not fathom why a prominent apologist spent so much time explaining and critiquing postmodernism during his lectures to college audiences before inviting people to convert to Christ. From this man's perspective, "all this philosophy" was a waste of time that would have been better spent explaining the gospel and giving the "invitation." I believe this evangelist's complaint was grounded in a misunderstanding. Apologetics can be used to remove or diminish intellectual obstacles that hinder people from embracing Christ as Lord; thus it serves as pre-evangelism. In some cases—especially in academic settings where unbelief has become second nature for so many—"all this philosophy" is required for evangelism to become even a possibility. J. Gresham Machen (1881–1937), the great biblical scholar and apologist, understood this well in the early twentieth century.

God usually exerts power [for conversion] in connection with certain prior conditions of the human mind, and it should be ours to create, so far as we can, with the help of God, those favourable conditions for the reception of the gospel. False ideas are the greatest obstacles to the reception of the gospel. We may preach with all the fervour 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.<sup>22</sup>

In a time when people are worried about "religion being shoved down their throat," it is important to draw a distinction between apologetics in service of evangelism and proselytizing. Proselytizing and evangelizing can be used synonymously in some contexts, but proselytizing is usually used pejoratively to mean the exercise of untoward or unethical influence on a person. However, Christian persuasion (involving both apologetics and evangelism), if it is true to Scripture and the Holy Spirit, eschews any undue pressure, personal threats, power plays, coercion, or deception. The goal of conversion does not justify every means of convincing, but only those means that flow from Scripture itself. Christ-like apologetics labors to communicate the truth in love and with wisdom (Eph 4:15). In truly Christian persuasion, one simply seeks to make known the Christian message so that others may hear it, believe it, and live it out.

<sup>22</sup>J. Gresham Machen, "Christianity and Culture," in *Christianity, Education, and the State*, ed. John W. Robbins (Jefferson, MD: Trinity Foundation, 1987), 51.

The results are left to God's sovereignty and the judgment of those who hear. The apostle Paul sets the standard in his letter to the Thessalonians:

For the appeal we make does not spring from error or impure motives, nor are we trying to trick you. On the contrary, we speak as those approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel. We are not trying to please people but God, who tests our hearts. You know we never used flattery, nor did we put on a mask to cover up greed—God is our witness. (1 Thess 2:3-5; see also Gal 1:10)

### THE BIBLICAL JUSTIFICATION FOR APOLOGETICS

Before exploring the rudiments of apologetic method in chapter two, a strong biblical support for apologetics needs to be established, since it seems many Christians deem apologetics unnecessary at best and harmful at worst. Some claim that the ways of God are incorrigibly mysterious and beyond figuring out, thus leaving no place for rational argumentation for Christian truth. “You cannot argue anyone into the kingdom,” it is often said. Yes, an infinitely wise God has myriad ways of getting our attention and revealing his saving truth. But the biblical evidence, as we will see, indicates that arguments in favor of Christianity are one way by which God reaches those in need of God's provision. The claim that no one is argued into Christianity is simply false. Although reasoning with unbelievers can prove frustrating, this may be more the fault of poor arguments, poor presentations, or poor character than of the fruitlessness of apologetics per se. William Lane Craig and J. P. Moreland, two leading Christian apologists and philosophers with decades of experience, claim that arguments have been pivotal tools in their evangelistic strategies, particularly on college campuses.<sup>23</sup> They go further: “To speak frankly, we do not know how one could minister effectively in a public way on our university campuses without training in philosophy.”<sup>24</sup> Moreover, noteworthy modern thinkers such as John Warwick Montgomery, C. S. Lewis,<sup>25</sup> and Lee Strobel<sup>26</sup> trace their conversions to key transformations in their thinking wrought through rational arguments.<sup>27</sup> And one should never

<sup>23</sup>Moreland and Craig, *Philosophical Foundations*, 4. My own less extensive, but not insignificant, experience in speaking to secular university groups since 1979 confirms their judgment.

<sup>24</sup>Moreland and Craig, *Philosophical Foundations*, 5.

<sup>25</sup>See C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1955). For an excellent account of the intellectual aspects of Lewis's conversion, see David C. Downing, *The Most Reluctant Convert: C. S. Lewis's Journey to Faith* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002).

<sup>26</sup>Lee Strobel, *The Case for Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998).

<sup>27</sup>Many of the accounts of the pilgrimages of leading Christian philosophers involve strong apologetic elements as well. See Kelly James Clark, ed., *Philosophers Who Believe* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993); and Thomas Morris, ed., *God and the Philosophers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995). See also the entry by the late Keith Yandell, “Christianity and a Conceptual Orientation,” in *Professors Who Believe*, ed. Paul M. Anderson (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998).

forget that the conversion of the great Saint Augustine involved sustained philosophical engagement with Christianity.<sup>28</sup>

The foundation of apologetics is the very character of God. There is but one God, whose nature and revelation must be affirmed and declared by the faithful in the face of multiple counterfeits (Ex 20:1-3). We discover the importance of reasoning regarding religious claims throughout the Old Testament. As Moreland points out,

Regularly, the prophets appealed to evidence to justify belief in the biblical God or in the divine authority of their inspired message: fulfilled prophecy [Is 40–45], the historical fact of miracles [Elijah and prophets of Baal], the inadequacy of finite pagan deities to be a cause of such a large, well-ordered universe compared to the God of the Bible [Jer 10:1-16], and so forth. They did not say, “God said it, that settles it, you should believe it!” They gave a rational defense for their claims.<sup>29</sup>

This is highlighted by the words of God through Isaiah the prophet, “Come now, and let us reason together,’ saith the LORD” (Is 1:18 KJV). We can add that Israel was given rational tests for the prophets. If they denied the religion that had been given to Israel, they were false prophets, even if their predictions came to pass (Deut 13:1-5). If their predictions did not come to pass, they were deemed false prophets (Deut 18:20). The creation account of Genesis 1 may have been written as a polemic or apologetic against the mythical cosmologies of other Near Eastern cultures. Genesis’s emphasis on one Creator who is separate from his nondivine creation radically contradicted the polytheism of surrounding cultures.<sup>30</sup> While the ruler of the universe is certainly in a position to issue threats and make pronouncements when needed, he also deigns to reason with his creatures who are made in his image and who, therefore, share (in a finite and fallible way) the ability to reason.

### JESUS AS APOLOGETIC EXEMPLAR

Because Jesus, echoing the Hebrew Scriptures, affirmed that we should love God with all of our being, including our minds (Mt 22:37-39), believers should defend God’s truth when it is assailed. Jesus himself did just this throughout his ministry. He was an apologist and a philosopher, although these categories are rarely applied to him today.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>28</sup>See Augustine, *The Confessions*. Many editions.

<sup>29</sup>J. P. Moreland, *Love Your God with All Your Mind* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1997), 132. I have added biblical references, which should be taken merely as a partial representation of the many biblical citations available.

<sup>30</sup>See Gerhard Hasel, “The Polemical Nature of the Genesis Account,” *Evangelical Quarterly* 46 (1974): 81-102.

<sup>31</sup>See Douglas Groothuis, “Jesus as Thinker and Apologist,” *Christian Research Journal* 25, no. 2 (2002): 28-31, 47-52. See also Norman Geisler and Patrick Zuckerman, *The Apologetics of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2009).

Consider just one example of Jesus' ability to escape neatly from between the horns of a dilemma when challenged intellectually.<sup>32</sup> The Sadducees attempt to spring a trap on Jesus by questioning him about the afterlife. They, unlike the Pharisees, did not believe in life after death, or in angels or spirits (although they were theists), and they granted special authority only to the first five books of the Hebrew Bible. So the Sadducees remind Jesus of Moses' command "that if a man dies without having children, his brother must marry the widow and raise up offspring for him" (Mt 22:24). Then they propose a scenario in which the same woman is married to and then widowed by seven brothers, none of whom sire any children by her. Then the woman dies. "Now then, at the resurrection, whose wife will she be of the seven, since all of them were married to her?" they ask pointedly (Mt 22:28).

Their argument is brilliant. The Sadducees know that Jesus reveres the law of Moses, as they do. They also know that Jesus, unlike themselves, teaches that there will be a resurrection of the dead. They think that these two beliefs are logically at odds with each other; they cannot both be true. The woman cannot be married to all seven at the resurrection (Mosaic law did not allow for polyandry), nor is there any reason why she should be married to any one out of the seven (thus honoring monogamy). Therefore, they figure, Jesus must either come against Moses or deny the afterlife if he is to remain free from contradiction. They are presenting this as a logical dilemma: either A (Moses' authority) or B (the afterlife).

Philosopher Michael Martin and others have asserted that Jesus praised un-critical faith and threatened more than he argued.<sup>33</sup> If these charges were correct, one might expect Jesus (1) to dodge the question with a pious and unrelated utterance, (2) to threaten hell for those who dare question his authority, or (3) simply to assert two logically incompatible propositions with no hesitation or shame. Instead, Jesus forthrightly says that the Sadducees are in error because they have failed to know the Scripture or the power of God.

At the resurrection people will neither marry nor be given in marriage; they will be like the angels in heaven. But about the resurrection of the dead—have you not read what God said to you, "I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob"? He is not the God of the dead but of the living. (Mt 22:30-32)

Jesus' response has an astuteness that may not be obvious. First, he challenges their assumption that belief in the resurrection means that we are committed to

<sup>32</sup>Another example of Jesus escaping the horns of a dilemma is found in Mt 22:15-22. See Groothuis, *On Jesus*, 26-27.

<sup>33</sup>Michael Martin, *The Case Against Christianity* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), 167.

believing that all of our premortem institutions will be retained in the post-mortem, resurrected world. None of the Hebrew Scriptures teach this, nor did Jesus believe it. Thus, the dilemma dissolves. Jesus states a third option that exposes this false dilemma as such: there is no married state at the resurrection.

Second, as part of his response to their logical trap, Jesus compares the resurrected state of men and women to that of the angels, thus challenging the Sadducees' disbelief in angels. (Although the Sadducees did not believe in angels, they knew that their fellow Jews who did believe in angels thought that angels did not marry or procreate.)

Third, Jesus cites a text from the Sadducees' own esteemed Scriptures (Ex 3:6), where God declares to Moses from the burning bush that he is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Jesus could have cited a variety of texts from writings outside the first five books of the Bible in support of the resurrection, such as the prophets (Dan 12:2) or Job (Job 19:25-27), but instead he deftly argues from their own trusted sources, which he also endorsed (Mt 5:17-20; Jn 10:31).

Fourth, Jesus capitalizes on the verb tense of the verse he quotes. God is (present tense) the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, all of whom had already died at the time God uttered this to Moses. God did not cease to be their God at their earthly demise. God did not say, "I was their God" (past tense). God is the God of the living, which includes even the "dead" patriarchs. "When the crowds heard this, they were astonished at his teaching," for Jesus had "silenced the Sadducees" (Mt 22:33-34).

### **OTHER BIBLICAL TESTIMONY**

Many other examples of Jesus' intellectual acumen and apologetic savvy may be mustered, but the point is that Jesus unapologetically engaged in apologetics with his sharpest critics. If he is the model for Christians, we should do so as well. Jesus' apostles and other writers of the New Testament certainly recognized this. Peter admonishes the followers of Jesus to be ready with an answer (apologetic) concerning their hope in the gospel and to present this in a gentle and respectful spirit (1 Pet 3:15-17). Likewise, Paul speaks of coming against arguments that deny the knowledge of God (2 Cor 10:3-5;<sup>34</sup> see also Col 2:8-9). Jude joins the chorus by writing, "Dear friends, although I was very eager to write to you about the salvation we share, I felt compelled to write and urge you to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to God's holy people" (Jude 3).

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<sup>34</sup>The context here is church discipline, but the idea has a universal application, which includes apologetics.



Luke, the author of the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles, recognized the need for certainty on behalf of the original recipient of his Gospel.

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. With this in mind, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I too decided to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, *so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.* (Lk 1:1-4, emphasis added)<sup>35</sup>

Not only do the writers of the New Testament commend apologetics, they engage in it as well—just as their Master did. The sermons of Peter and Paul recorded in Acts all have a strong apologetic backbone. For the Jews, these apostles develop an apologetic of Jesus as the fulfillment of ancient Jewish prophecy concerning the Messiah. For the Gentiles, the emphasis rests more on the evidence of God’s workings through nature and history in general.<sup>36</sup> One sermon of Paul’s deserves a bit more commentary, since it exudes apologetics aptitude.

#### **PAUL IN ATHENS: APOLOGIST EXTRAORDINAIRE**

Paul came to Athens after fleeing persecution by the Thessalonians in Berea (Acts 17:13-15). His witness at Athens is the most detailed account in Acts of a Christian teacher challenging non-Jewish thinkers.

Athens in Paul’s day was not at the height of its intellectual, cultural, or military influence, but it was still a cultural powerhouse. It was much like a major college town today. Yet Paul was “greatly distressed” because the city was full of idols (Acts 17:16). But instead of unleashing a thundering condemnation on the Athenians, Paul began to reason with the Jews in the synagogue and with the God-fearing Greeks day by day, as was his custom.

There was “a group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers” in Athens who “began to debate” with Paul (Acts 17:18). Although they wrongly accused him of being a “babbler” (or intellectual plagiarist) who advocated “foreign gods,” they nevertheless invited him to speak to the Areopagus (Acts 17:18-19). This was a prestigious group of thinkers who deemed themselves the custodians of new ideas.

**From creation to Creator.** Paul found common ground by noting that they were “very religious,” given their many “objects of worship” (Acts 17:22-23). Paul knew this was idolatry, but he used a neutral description in order to build a bridge instead of erecting a wall. We too should be distressed by the emblems of unbelief

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<sup>35</sup>Craig Blomberg discusses the reliability of the New Testament in chap. 21 of this volume.

<sup>36</sup>See F. F. Bruce, *The Defense of the Gospel in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1977).

in our midst, yet we should try to discern and capitalize on points of contact with these other worldviews.

Paul then reports that he had found an altar to “an unknown God” (Acts 17:23). But what they took to be unknown, Paul now declares to them. His declaration (Acts 17:24-31) is a masterpiece of Christian persuasion, the beauty of which cannot be captured in a short space.<sup>37</sup> Knowing the perspective of the philosophers he was facing, Paul begins not with the message of Jesus but the biblical doctrine of creation—a belief alien to both Stoics and Epicureans (and to all Greek thought).

Paul affirms that a personal and transcendent God created the entire universe, which depends on him for its continued existence. “He himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else” (Acts 17:24-25; see also Heb 1:3). This sets up a sharp antithesis between Christianity and both philosophical camps. The Stoics believed in an impersonal “world soul”—something like today’s New Age spiritual principle or “the Force” in the Star Wars movies—while the Epicureans believed in several deities who had no interest in humanity.

This Creator, Paul declares, is also closely involved with humanity. He created all people from one man and established the conditions in which they live. He did this so that people “would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us” (Acts 17:27).

Against the Athenian philosophies, Paul presents a God who is personal, transcendent, immanent, and relational. He conveys all this before uttering a word about Christ. Paul should be our apologetic model here as well. Unless we establish a biblical view of God, people will likely place Jesus in the wrong worldview, taking him to be merely a guru or swami or prophet rather than Lord, God, and Savior (Phil 3:20; Col 2:9).

***Finding common ground.*** Having established the antithesis between “the Lord of heaven and earth” (Acts 17:24) and the false gods of the Athenians, Paul again makes a point of contact with their worldview by citing Greek poets: “‘For in him we live and move and have our being.’ As some of your own poets have said, ‘We are his offspring’” (Acts 17:28).

Although their fundamental worldview was off base, the Greeks had some sense of the divine as well as their dependence on it. They were partially right, although largely wrong. Given God’s general revelation in creation and conscience (Rom 1–2), Christian witnesses should always try to find the scattered elements of truth embedded within darkened worldviews.

<sup>37</sup>See D. A. Carson, “Athens Revisited,” in *Telling the Truth*, ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000).

Paul continues by arguing that since we are God's offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like any humanly crafted image. As Adam Clarke writes,

If we are the offspring of God, He cannot be like those images of gold, silver, and stone which are formed by the art and device of man, for the parent must resemble his offspring. Seeing therefore that we are living and intelligent beings, He from whom we have derived our being must be living and intelligent. It is necessary also that the object of religious worship should be much more excellent than the worshipper; but man is . . . more excellent than an image made of gold, silver, or stone. And yet it would be impious to worship a man; how much more so to worship these images as gods!<sup>38</sup>

The logic of Paul's argument is compelling. Furthermore, he makes his case on the basis of the Athenians' own beliefs about God and humanity. Paul displays an astute apologetic prowess.

**Defending the faith.** Paul lastly says that in the past God overlooked ignorance about himself, but now "he commands all people everywhere to repent" because he has "set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed." God has proven this to be true by raising Jesus from the dead (Acts 17:30-31). Acts only gives us a summary of Paul's speech; he would have spoken far longer than the written text permits. So, we can be sure that Paul explained the full meaning of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection (see 1 Cor 15:1-8).

Paul is not content to give a philosophical lecture comparing the biblical and Greek worldviews. He calls his audience to respond individually and existentially to Jesus Christ. Likewise, apologists today should be alert to when they should invite people to repent and accept the crucified and resurrected Jesus Christ as Lord.

The author, Luke, concludes this remarkable narrative by describing the various reactions: some sneered at Paul, others wanted to hear more, and some became "followers of Paul" (Acts 17:32-34). To win this response from a group of worldly philosophers is a noteworthy achievement.

With Paul as our model, we should be disturbed at the unbelief in our midst. Therefore, we should winsomely, lovingly, and courageously enter the marketplace of ideas as apologists who defend the Christian worldview. We do this by establishing common ground with our audience, distinguishing the Christian worldview from alien philosophies and calling unbelievers to respond rightly to the truth of Jesus Christ.

<sup>38</sup>Adam Clarke, *Commentary on the Holy Bible: One-Volume Edition*, abridged by Ralph Earle (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1967), 1006.

Establishing a strong justification for the imperative of apologetics is not sufficient for the endeavor, however. The bad man with a good argument is only half clothed. One may have a sword (arguments) but lack a shield (godly character), and thus become vulnerable and ineffective. Therefore, it is wise to consider briefly the spirituality and character of the apologist before looking at the details of apologetic method.<sup>39</sup>

### THE SPIRITUALITY OF THE CHRISTIAN APOLOGIST

Humility is the cardinal virtue of the apologist (and of every Christian). Humility does not require abjuring religious certainty in favor of intellectual timidity. On the contrary, in a verse with multiple applications to apologetics, Paul declares that “the Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love and self-discipline” (2 Tim 1:7). Humility recognizes the source of all good things—intellectual and otherwise—as rooted in God’s grace. As such, they are gifts deserving of thanks. It is difficult to be dependent on God and thankful to God while being arrogant. As Andrew Murray points out, human humility is grounded in our very existence as creatures. We are beholden to our Creator for everything and should keep that in the forefront of our minds.<sup>40</sup> Humility lives only in love. We love God only because he loved us first; we love others and want them to live as lovers of Christ, only because God loves them and has commissioned us to love them as well. So, the virtues of love—patience, kindness, endurance, forgiveness, truthfulness, and so on—should suffuse and animate all apologetics (1 Cor 13:4-6).

Humility, for the Christian, also stems from our status as forgiven violators of God’s goodness. As such, “You are not your own; you were bought at a price”—the price of Christ’s shed blood and battered body on the cross (1 Cor 6:19-20). If we grow in apologetic ability—or any other area of competence in ministry—without growing in the grace of humility, an ugly arrogance results, which threatens to blunt or even undermine the force of the best apologetics. The apostle Paul, one of the stellar minds of antiquity, knew this well: “But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us” (2 Cor 4:7). There is no room for boasting in oneself, as Paul points out: “May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world” (Gal 6:14). Because of our fallen

<sup>39</sup>For a book-length treatment of Paul in Athens and its pertinence today, see Paul Copan and Kenneth Litwak, *The Gospel in the Marketplace of Ideas: Paul’s Mars Hill Experience for Our Pluralistic World* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2014).

<sup>40</sup>See Andrew Murray, *Humility* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2001); Douglas Groothuis, “Humility: The Heart of Righteousness,” in *Christianity That Counts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1994); Timothy Keller, *The Freedom of Self-Forgetfulness* (New York: 10 Publishing, 2012).

propensity to rest in proper beliefs while letting our spiritual maturity lag behind the truth of what we believe, Paul exhorted Timothy to watch both his life and his doctrine closely (1 Tim 4:16). Apologists must do likewise.

### **PRAYER AND APOLOGETICS**

Humility embraces prayer and lives within its embrace, whether for apologetics or any other enterprise. Paul requested prayer for his outreach to unbelievers (Col 4:2-4; Eph 6:20). The praying and fasting of Paul's sending church (Acts 13:1-3) were behind his dramatic encounter with a sorcerer, who sought to dissuade Paul and his companions from explaining the gospel to the sorcerer's superior, Sergius Paulus, an intelligent man who sought out Paul's teaching (Acts 13:1-12). Paul prevailed in sidelining the sorcerer and converting Paulus through the power of the Holy Spirit and in accord with the prayer and fasting of his sending church.

Prayer enters deeply into every aspect of apologetics. The apologist must pray for wisdom in preparation for apologetic engagement, for the right words and spirit in an apologetic opportunity, and for the audience to receive the truth and respond positively and wisely (see Jn 16:13 and Eph 6:18). Francis Schaeffer affirmed that a solid apologetic is not in competition with prayer for the moving of the Holy Spirit. "When I am talking to an individual, or sitting on a platform talking to 5000 people and answering questions, very often, more often than most people know, I am praying for them."<sup>41</sup>

One needs to find courage and zeal for apologetics through prayer (and perhaps fasting). It is easy to become complacent and unfeeling about outreach in a pluralistic culture where we are greeted with the signs of unbelief every day. We are told that life is about possessions, self-esteem, appearance, and fame—and we almost believe it. We are told that all religions are good and that we should pick the one that works best for us—and we almost believe it. The antidote is biblical realism. The gospel is infinitely precious because it is the only way out of sin, death, and hell—and the only way into forgiveness, a new creation in Christ, and eternal life.

### **SPIRITUAL WARFARE IN APOLOGETIC ENDEAVOR**

With forty-five years of experience in not only teaching apologetics to myriad folks in schools and churches, but *practicing* apologetics on the radio, on television, in the lecture hall, in the classroom, on the street, in the coffee shop and

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<sup>41</sup>Francis A. Schaeffer, *The God Who Is There*, 30th anniv. ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 205-6.

pub, through mail and email, on social media, through debates and panel discussions, I guarantee you that this discipline demands more (but not less) than zeal, intellectual preparation, relational intelligence, and rhetorical skill. Faithful apologetics needs spiritual preparation for spiritual battles.<sup>42</sup>

The apostle Paul, the veteran and unrivaled apologist, knew it well. Writing to believers in the occult stronghold city of Ephesus (see Acts 19), Paul gives this advice and encouragement to Christians:

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms (Eph 6:10-12).

Paul had struggled against flesh and blood when he was stoned, arrested, imprisoned, flogged, shipwrecked, betrayed by false brethren, and more. He recounts these terrible hardships in his letters (1 Cor 15:30-32; 2 Cor 11:16-33) and they are narrated in the book of Acts. Despite this, Paul sees the ultimate struggle not to be “against flesh and blood,” but against “evil supernaturalism.”<sup>43</sup> So he tells how to prepare for battle.

He urges us to stand our ground by putting on “the full armor of God” (Eph 6:11-18). That armor consists of (1) “the belt of truth”—a deep knowledge of God’s character and will as applied to our lives; (2) “the breastplate of righteousness”—a godly character; (3) “feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace”—a willingness to proclaim the gospel; (4) “the shield of faith”—the protection of complete trust in the Commander in Chief that extinguishes “all the flaming arrows of the evil one;” (5) “the helmet of salvation”—the assurance of a right relationship with God through faith in Christ; (6) “the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God”—the offensive weapon of scriptural truth applied to all situations (see Heb 4:12). Paul also adds that we should “pray in the Spirit” that our spiritual suit of armor might not slip off due to inattention to God.<sup>44</sup>

Psalm 91 also offers rich assurance of the protection of the believer in the “shelter of the Most High” and in the “shadow of the Almighty” (Ps 91:1). It is well worthy of meditation and memorization. The psalmist later declares the believer’s power over evil: “You will tread on the lion and the cobra; you will trample the

<sup>42</sup>I wrote about this topic in “Spiritual Warfare” in *Confronting the New Age* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988). Some of what follows is adapted from that chapter.

<sup>43</sup>This is the term that Ed Murphy gives to the spiritual world arrayed against God and God’s people. See his book *Handbook on Spiritual Warfare*, rev. and expanded ed. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2003).

<sup>44</sup>For a careful and insightful treatment of these verses, along with wise written prayers, see Mark Buebeck, *Overcoming the Adversary* (Chicago: Moody, 1984), 64-137.

great lion and the serpent” (Ps 91:13; see also Rom 16:20). As Christians do battle with false ideas that keep people from coming to Christ, they are dealing with power encounters, not just interacting with ideas, individuals, and events. We triumph “not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,” says the LORD Almighty” (Zech 4:6; Acts 1:8).

The armor-clad Christian is ready for encounters with the enemy, and there will be encounters any time the gospel is brought to bear on unbelief. Acts 13:1-12 gives us an example of a confrontation between opposing spiritual powers, which is often called a “power encounter.” These verses give us seven principles for spiritual warfare or power over error.

The gospel was spreading like wildfire over the known world, as Jesus’ resurrected power was being unleashed in preaching, healing, signs, and wonders. The kingdom of darkness was being displaced by the kingdom of God. Conflict necessarily ensued. As the church at Antioch was seeking God through prayer and fasting, the Holy Spirit revealed that Paul and Barnabas should be sent out on mission (Acts 13:1-3), the first to the Gentiles. Thus, we need (1) *a God-ward orientation to discern God’s call to mission and to receive God’s power over error*. The call came through prayer and fasting, not ill-conceived plans. We also need (2) *the wisdom of the church* to venture out in mission with wisdom. The church was multiethnic and diverse. Simon called Niger was dark-skinned. Manaen had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch (a high-ranking political leader), and so was in the upper ruling class. Although diverse, they united in mission and sent out Paul and Barnabas (see Gal 3:26-28).

When Paul, Barnabas, and John (their helper) embarked on their mission, they had the wisdom and prayer support of their church behind them. They were led by the Holy Spirit to go to Seleucia and sailed from there to Cyprus and eventually to Salamis, where they proclaimed the word of God in the synagogues (Acts 13:4-5). Thus, we find two more principles: (3) *we need to proclaim God’s word to find power over error* and (4) *helpers behind the scenes are vital for ministry*.

The story heats up when the team gets to Pathos, where Sergius Paulus, a Roman official, asked to see them because “he wanted to hear the word of God.” He is called “an intelligent man,” and likely needed the kind of apologetic arguments that Paul could marshal. But Elymas the sorcerer (also called Bar-Jesus) “opposed them and tried to turn the proconsul from the faith” (Acts 13:7-8). It was then common for political leaders to enlist occult assistance; and this was part of the demonic design that Jesus came to destroy. Another principle for spiritual warfare emerges: (5) *the power of error opposes the truth of the gospel*.

Then Paul, filled with the Spirit, sprang into spiritual action. Staring him down and condemned him as a “child of the devil” hell bent on “perverting the right ways of the Lord” (Acts 13:10). Paul then pronounced that he would be shut up by being blinded for a time. And he was. At this, the proconsul “believed, for he was amazed at the teaching about the Lord” (Acts 13:12). In this encounter we find two more principles for spiritual warfare related to outreach: (6) *A Spirit-filled and biblical-informed Christian challenges error courageously*. Paul did not back down, but used his Spirit-led authority to get the sorcerer out of the way. We may not have this kind of authority, but we need tenacity in the face of opposition to stand our ground and speak the truth. Lastly, (7) *God’s work in God’s way finds power over error, but this does not eliminate hardships and setbacks in our mission* (Acts 14:22). Getting this far was not easy for the team, but they prevailed and won a convert.

### **THE GOAL OF APOLOGETICS: CONVERSION AND INTELLECTUAL CONFIDENCE**

Biblically understood, conversion is a radical turn away from sin, selfishness, and Satan, and a turn toward God and his kingdom. This incorporates the whole person, not merely the intellect. However, there is no reason to follow and obey the God of the Bible unless Christianity is true and worth obeying. If it were false, it would not matter how attractive it might be. If it were true but unimportant, why should anyone even care?<sup>45</sup> Therefore, conversion is necessarily intellectual and involves cognitive assent to propositions taken to be objectively true. For this to occur, we must understand what the gospel requires of a person and on what basis it requires it. This understanding is classically known as *notitia*. One cannot be a Christian without knowing what Christianity actually is. Here the Christian worldview and doctrine are primary. Any candidate for conversion should believe that (1) God exists as a holy being before whom all humans are held morally accountable for their transgressions (sins); (2) the malady of sin is so deep and pervasive that any rectification of the problem must come from outside of our wounded and rebellious beings; (3) God, the loving and just author of salvation, sent his only Son, Jesus Christ, to live the perfect life we cannot live and to make atonement for our sin in order to provide the way of reconciliation between us and God; (4) the reality of this work was vindicated by Christ’s resurrection from the dead. The path of forgiveness and restoration

<sup>45</sup>I agree with Alvin Plantinga’s comment that Christianity is “the maximally important truth” (*Warranted Christian Belief* [New York: Oxford University Press, 2000], 499).



is open to all, but only by faith alone and only through the finished work of Jesus Christ alone.<sup>46</sup>

Only if we believe in the truth of the Christian message will we be able to trust the object of that message: God as revealed in and through Jesus Christ. This component of faith is *fiducia*, or trust; it is closely related to belief, but involves more than bare assent. It includes entrusting oneself in an existential act to Christ and his cause. While Scripture speaks of the need to “believe” in God, it also speaks of those who “received” him (Jn 1:12). A person believes that certain biblical propositions are objectively true; then the person subjectively appropriates these truths as his or her own. In so doing, the person gives allegiance to the object of these truths: Christ himself. Trust in this case may be likened to marriage. A lover believes many favorable things about his or her beloved before marriage, but only becomes married after sincerely affirming “I do” and giving oneself to that partner.

Faith in Christ, biblically understood, guides and inspires a new way of knowing, being and doing. It has effects that James summarizes as “good works” (Jas 2:14-26; see also Eph 2:9). These works—which include inward renovation, both intellectual and moral, as well as outward behavior—are not the basis or warrant for one’s favorable standing with God. That status comes by grace alone and is received by faith alone in Christ alone (Eph 2:8-9; Titus 3:5). However, where faith takes root, fruit takes hold and grows (Mt 7:15-23). This understanding is vital for apologetics because of the widespread problem of false conversions and nominal Christianity. Given biblical criteria, far more Americans claim to be Christians than are truly glory bound. Apologetics aims at conversion, not generic spirituality or religious externalism. Conversion requires repentance, as Jesus and John the Baptist and all the Hebrew prophets made so clear (Mt 4:17). While a call to repentance might be thought more the job of evangelism, it factors into apologetics for two reasons. First, apologetics labors to present the Christian worldview. One aspect of that worldview is that people are disordered in their passions, self-centered, guilty before a holy God, and in need of radical forgiveness and transformation. Repentant faith is the way into new life in Christ.<sup>47</sup> Second, apologetics should show that repentance makes sense because Christianity is true, rational and, in Pascal’s sense, “attractive”—it promises our “true good.” This true good is the restoration of the person through the achievements of Jesus Christ.

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<sup>46</sup>See Francis A. Schaeffer, *The Finished Work of Christ* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1998). More will be said on the gospel message in the chapters on “The Atonement.”

<sup>47</sup>On the necessity of repentance for conversion, see John MacArthur, *The Gospel According to Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1988).

Apologetics also equips questioning or doubting Christians to find the intellectual confidence to be a wise witnesses to the truth of the gospel. As Christians master apologetic arguments, their knowledge of the truth and rationality of their beliefs increases, thus giving them a stronger platform for explaining and defending “the good news of God’s grace” (Acts 20:24). The Christian’s goal should be to gain “all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” concerning the Christian worldview (Col 2:3).

### DIALOGICAL AND CONTEXTUAL APOLOGETICS

The articulation of a sound philosophical method of apologetics is the burden of chapter three. However, I conclude this chapter by relating some practical issues of apologetics pertaining to opportunities, dialogue, discernment, and context.<sup>48</sup>

Apologetics need gigs, and Christianity needs an audience. To that end, those convinced of the apologetic imperative should seek out as many forums to present the Christian faith as possible. Because we do not know which opportunities will materialize, we should cast a broad net over many territories (Eccles 11:1-6).<sup>49</sup> Apologetics needs to speak to people’s condition where they are. Thus, after developing apologetic skills in the arguments, apologetics ought to develop their skills in finding venues in which to practice their art. Like Paul, they should pray and seek to make the gospel known in new places and in new ways (Rom 15:20). And they should be willing to fail. I have ventured many apologetic possibilities that never happened. But I am undaunted. I have asked two secular philosophers to read the first edition of *Christian Apologetics*. I would read their books defending another viewpoint. We could then publish our respective findings in a journal. They both declined. I could go on, but I am undaunted in my creative efforts. Many of my ideas for outreach have met with success.

The forums for apologetic presentation are legion, and we should use our sanctified imaginations to figure out new ways to present ancient truths. However, some forums are, in a sense, static. One publishes an argument, either in a book, an article, a letter to the editor, a tract, a posting to a webpage or blog, or through some other written form—and that’s that.<sup>50</sup> These statements may

<sup>48</sup>See also Os Guinness, *Fool’s Talk: Recover the Art of Christian Persuasion* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015); David Clark’s *Dialogical Apologetics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1994); and Greg Koukl, *Tactics: A Game Plan for Discussing Your Christian Convictions*, 10th anniversary ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2019).

<sup>49</sup>See Douglas Groothuis, “Cast Your Bread on the Waters: Taking Risks and Being Creative in Christian Witness,” *Christian Research Journal* 37, no. 4 (2014), [www.equip.org/article/cast-bread-waters-taking-risks-creative-christian-witness/](http://www.equip.org/article/cast-bread-waters-taking-risks-creative-christian-witness/).

<sup>50</sup>While many Christian tracts are reactionary, simplistic, or otherwise offensive, the medium itself is worthwhile. I have written tracts and distributed them. See Douglas Groothuis, “Event Specific Evangelism,” in *Confronting the New Age* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988).

elicit a response, which in turn can be responded to by the apologist, but the dialogical aspect is usually minimal. Other forums are more dialogical because they involve direct discussion. These include face-to-face meetings, lectures with a question-answer session, debates, letters, emails, social media, phone calls, and so on.<sup>51</sup> Although dialogue can devolve into a pointless exchange of mere opinion with little intellectual challenge, it need not do so. The spirit of persuasive dialogue was alive in the teaching and preaching of Paul throughout the book of Acts. Paul rationally engaged Jew and Gentile, common person, royalty, and philosopher—all for the cause of Christ. This, in fact, is true for all the outreach in Acts. As Ajith Fernando says, “All the messages recorded in Acts had a strong apologetic content.”<sup>52</sup>

We can seek similar dialogues with unbelievers of all sorts. These dialogues necessarily involve all of the virtues requisite to apologetics discussed previously. Especially important is the humility that involves the willingness to listen and temper our responses to the intellectual and spiritual condition of the one who is engaged. This requires certain relational skills as well as worldview discernment. Love for the lost also carries a cost for the apologist, as Schaeffer noted: “This kind of [apologetic] communication is not cheap. To understand and speak to sincere but utterly confused twentieth-century people is costly. It is tiring; it will open you to temptations and pressures. Genuine love, in the last analysis, means a willingness to be entirely exposed to the person to whom we are talking.”<sup>53</sup>

In defending and commending the faith, Christians need to detect exactly what their dialogue partners believe about reality. While the technical discussion of worldviews falls into set categories—theism, deism, pantheism, naturalism, polytheism—people’s beliefs are not always that well categorized. Through hundreds of interviews over a period of twenty years, my students in Christian apologetics at Denver Seminary have found that people often hold a smorgasbord of beliefs that do not easily fit into any unified worldview. There may be a dash of Christianity (left over from Sunday school), heaps of New Age spirituality (for personal enrichment), a dose of naturalism (about scientific matters) and, of course, substantial seasoning by relativism (which is everywhere). The savvy apologist must shift through this welter of conflicting beliefs through intent listening, as well as caring but challenging responses. The apologist should reveal that he or she is trying to understand what the unbeliever’s beliefs are, how these

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<sup>51</sup>On engaging social media, see Douglas Groothuis, “Understanding Social Media,” *Christian Research Journal* 33, no. 3 (2010), [www.equip.org/article/understanding-social-media](http://www.equip.org/article/understanding-social-media).

<sup>52</sup>Ajith Fernando, *Acts*, the NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998), 30.

<sup>53</sup>Schaeffer, *God Who Is There*, 149.

beliefs relate to each other, and how they are connected to the external world and the individual's life.

Once a person's worldview has been identified, the apologist should work on establishing common ground with the unbeliever in order to move closer to the Christian perspective. If the unbeliever is an atheist, we must start from scratch and argue for theism. However, the atheist may (inconsistently) believe in objective moral truth. If so, there is significant common ground. If the unbeliever is a theist, but not a Christian theist, then the emphasis will be on things unique to Christian theism, particularly the incarnation.

But besides worldview detection and looking for points of common ground, we need relational wisdom as to when and how to present arguments for Christian truth. Apologetic “dumping” or “blasting” with little concern for the state of the soul of the unbeliever may relieve pent-up tension and display the apologist's knowledge, but it does little to bring anyone closer to eternal salvation. Some people are quite ready to get an earful of Christian truth; others are so closed that one must retreat and re-strategize for another occasion.<sup>54</sup> We need discernment into the human heart for wise apologetics, as Pascal highlighted: “We think playing upon man is like playing upon an ordinary organ. It is indeed an organ, but strange, shifting and changeable. Those who know only to play an ordinary organ would never be in tune on this one. You have to know where the keys are.”<sup>55</sup>

Another crucial matter for apologetic encounters is context or situation. Since our culture places little value on genuine intellectual dialogue and discourse (which takes time, effort, and discipline), we must deliberately seek out contexts in which these ideals may be lived out. Although we may find ourselves in apologetic discussions “on the fly” in less than ideal situations (God often engineers such divine appointments), the best intellectual environment is usually one in which there is silence and time to reflect and discuss the things that matter most. This ambience should be as free as possible from distracting stimuli—particularly electronic screens—and the hurried and harried atmosphere of contemporary culture.<sup>56</sup> Silence, however, is a rich atmosphere for rationally engaging truth, and should be cultivated.

The virtues of hospitality and conviviality loom large on the apologetic horizon. Opening up one's home for discussions with unbelievers is ideal. Sadly, however,

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<sup>54</sup>See Jesus' discussion of “pearls before swine” in Matthew 7:6.

<sup>55</sup>Pascal, *Pensées* 55/111, 44.

<sup>56</sup>See Douglas Groothuis, “Television: Agent of Truth Decay,” in *Truth Decay* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000); Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, 20th anniv. ed. (New York: Penguin, 2005); and Alan Noble, *Disruptive Witness: Speaking Truth in a Distracted Age* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2018).

it is infrequent, given the breakdown of community and the tendency to “cocoon” inside one’s home, spending more time in front of the home entertainment center than with other humans in conversation about what matters most. Much of the success of Francis and Edith Schaeffer’s ministry in reaching unbelievers came as a result of inviting unbelievers to live with them at their L’Abri ministry in the Swiss Alps.<sup>57</sup> Of course, few of us have chalets in the Alps, but the principle of closely associating with and loving unbelievers holds true nevertheless.

Exemplary apologetic endeavor can be summed up in a fivefold alliteration. The Christian apologist should be *competent* (in argument) and thus *confident* (in attitude) and *courageous* (in witness). These apologetic skills should be demonstrated with *compassion* (for the lost) and *creativity* (for the broadest reach possible).

### **THE SUM OF THE MATTER: DEFEND THE TRUTH**

We must earnestly endeavor to know the truth of the biblical worldview and to make it known with integrity to as many people as possible with the best arguments available. To know God in Christ means that we desire to make Christian truth available to others in the most compelling form possible. To be created in God’s rational, moral, and relational image means that our entire being should be aimed at the glorification of God in Christian witness. A significant part of that witness involves Christian apologetics.

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<sup>57</sup>For the remarkable story of the Schaeffers, see Edith Schaeffer, *L’Abri*, 2nd ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1992); Edith Schaeffer, *The Tapestry: The Life and Times of Francis and Edith Schaeffer* (Waco, TX: Word, 1981). See also William Edgar, *Schaeffer and the Spiritual Life: Countercultural Spirituality* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013).

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