

## *Introduction to Christian Apologetics*

Most of us grow up accepting the things we're taught as true. As children we are taught that the earth is a globe and not flat, that there are seven continents, and that the universe around us is made up of tiny particles called atoms, which in themselves are composed of even smaller particles. If we happen to grow up in a family that embraces the Christian faith, we learn the stories of Abraham, Joseph, David, Jesus, and others, and accept those stories as historical narratives. In addition, we are taught that there is a God, that the Bible is God's revelation to humanity, and that Jesus is God's only Son who died for the sins of the world and rose from the dead, thereby offering eternal life to those who follow Him.

However, whether we grew up in a Christian home or came to accept the beliefs of the Christian faith later in life, at some point we've probably wondered whether what we've been taught is indeed true. Perhaps you've been challenged with, or have asked yourself, such questions as, "How do I know Jesus rose from the dead?"; "How do I know the Bible is true and not filled with errors or the made-up ideas of individuals from the past?"; or "How do I know God really exists?" These are common questions that have been asked of the Christian faith for generations, and these are the types of questions every believer should be prepared to answer, both for themselves and for others.

One of the more noted verses in the Bible that instructs Christians to be ready to respond to these types of questions is found in 1 Peter 3:15. To provide some context, the book of 1 Peter was written to believers who had been dispersed throughout the area of modern-day Turkey and who were experiencing persecution because of their faith. In fact, Peter's purpose for writing this letter was to encourage his readers to live faithful and holy lives in the face of suffering. But how could they live faithfully amidst such opposition?

In the verses leading up to 1 Peter 3:15, Peter reminds his readers that they are the inheritors of several spiritual benefits and blessings, and that they have been called to a certain standard of living. He reminds them that:

- They have been born again to a living hope (1 Peter 1:3);
- They are to prepare their minds for action and be sober-minded (1 Peter 1:13);
- They are to live holy lives in this world as a testimony to their faith (1 Peter 1:15);
- They, like living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house (1 Peter 2:5);
- They are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession (1 Peter 2:9);
- They should be willing to endure suffering at the hands of the unjust as a testimony of their faith in God just as Jesus did in His own life and death (1 Peter 2:20);
- They should possess a unity of mind, sympathy, love for one another, and be humble (1 Peter 3:8);
- They should not fear those who persecute them (1 Peter 3:14);
- They should be able to give a reason for the hope they have in Christ (1 Peter 3:15).

It is the last item in this list of benefits and callings that we want to focus on, for it is here that Peter informs not only his readers but also all believers of one of the tremendous responsibilities we all have been given. That is, to be ready, whenever called upon, to give a reason for the hope we have in Christ. Peter writes in 1 Peter 3:14–15,

But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect.

In these verses Peter offers two main challenges.

## A Call to Honor Christ

First, a call to honor Christ as holy. The idea of honoring Christ as holy is taken from the Greek word *hagiázō*, which refers to the act of treating something with a sense of awe or viewing it as

separate from other common items. Other translations of 1 Peter 3:15 render the term as to *set apart*, to *revere*, or to *sanctify* Christ.

In Matthew 6:9 the word is translated as “hallowed” in reference to God’s name, “Our Father in heaven, *hallowed* be Your name.” Here Jesus is requesting that His followers set the Father’s name (that which represents His identity) as something special, unique, and holy.

In John 17:17, Jesus entreated the Father to sanctify His followers in God’s Word when He said, “*Sanctify* them in the truth; Your word is truth.” Jesus was asking that the Father make His followers spiritually separated from the world through the infusing of God’s Word into their lives.

But what does this term mean in regards to daily living and practice today? What is Peter asking his readers to do when he says to *honor*, *set apart*, *revere*, or *sanctify* Christ as Lord in their hearts? Simply put, Peter is asking believers to recognize that Jesus is someone who should be distinct, holy, and unique in their lives.

We *honor* Christ in our lives when we put Him first. That is, when we put His will for our lives above our own desires, which entails making decisions that honor and bring glory to Him through how we live. It’s important to note that Peter’s admonition to honor Christ assumes the reality of salvation in a person’s life. Only by embracing the life-changing truth that Jesus Christ offered Himself as a sacrifice for our sins can we truly *honor* Him as Lord. And honoring Christ in our daily lives begins by acknowledging Him as Savior and following Him as Lord. Through faithful allegiance to Jesus, we will lay the foundation upon which the defense of our faith ultimately rests.

## A Call to Defend Our Faith

Not only does Peter instruct believers to *honor* Christ, he also challenges us to be ready and able to provide answers as to why we believe what we believe. The ability to give an answer for our faith in Christ can encompass a simple, or sometimes complex, response depending on the question asked.

The practice of giving a reason for what we believe as followers of Christ is called Christian apologetics. The term *apologetics* is

derived from the Greek word *apologia*. In the first century, during the time of Peter, it referred to the practice of preparing a well-thought-out legal defense or argument used to refute charges levied against an individual or a particular philosophical position. Peter uses the term to refer to a defense of the hope that comes from faith in Jesus.

The term *apologia* occurs eight times in the New Testament. Let's read each of these occurrences to gain a better understanding of how the word is used in different contexts:

- In Acts 22:1, after being surrounded by a mob at the temple, Paul says, "Hear the *defense* (the *apologia*) that I now make before you."
- Later in Acts 25:16, Paul points out to those who accused him before Festus that Roman law does not convict people without a trial, but that they must be given an opportunity to meet their "accusers face to face" and have an opportunity to *defend* themselves (or give an *apologia* for themselves).
- To those who questioned his authority as an apostle, Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 9:3. "This is my *defense* to those who would examine me" (this is my *apologia*).
- In 2 Corinthians 7:11, Paul, in speaking of the Corinthians' concern for him, says, "For see what earnestness this godly grief has produced in you, but also what eagerness to clear yourselves" (or to give an *apologia* for yourselves).
- To those in Philippi, Paul writes in 1:7, "you are all partakers with me of grace, both in my imprisonment and in the *defense* [in giving an *apologia*] and confirmation of the gospel." A few verses later, in 1:16 he says that some preach Christ out of love, knowing that he was put there for the *defense* of the gospel." (or put here to give an *apologia*).
- In 2 Timothy 4:16 Paul related that at his "first *defense* [or his first *apologia*]" no one came to stand by him, but all deserted him.
- And, finally, in 1 Peter 3:15 we read Peter's admonition for believers to always be prepared to make a *defense* [an *apologia*] to anyone who asks about the hope that was in them.

These uses of the word *apologia* indicate that Christianity is not a blind faith but a reasonable faith that can be defended and

supported with facts. This is not to say that one can argue another person into salvation. According to Ephesians 2:8–9, salvation is only through faith because of God’s grace. Period. The purpose of apologetics is to prepare the way to faith by allowing an unbeliever to clearly see what Christianity teaches. Facts do not destroy faith, they support it.

An example is found in the first fourteen verses of 1 Corinthians 15 where Paul uses the reality of the resurrection of Jesus as evidence of the veracity of the Christian faith. Here Paul appeals to historical evidence in the form of eyewitness testimony and the accuracy of Scripture as the underlying basis for his faith. Paul even stakes the validity of the Christian faith as a whole on the historical truthfulness of the resurrection. Without it, Paul says in verse 19 of the same chapter, “we are of all people most to be pitied.”

Unlike other religious systems that deter questions about their origins and beliefs, the Christian faith is grounded in truth and reality. Therefore, there is no need for a believer to hide from tough questions or fear engaging with the outward and inward components that make up the practice of apologetics.

Outwardly, the practice of apologetics seeks to give answers to why the Christian faith is true in contrast to other belief systems. Inwardly, apologetics seeks to correct wrong beliefs about the faith. And contrary to popular thought, the word *apologia* does not mean to apologize, even though the English word is derived from this ancient Greek term. As believers we are never asked to apologize for God’s truth or our faith, but we are called to defend it.

The practice of defending the beliefs of the Christian faith can be found in many texts of the New Testament. For example, in Colossians 4:5–6 Paul writes, “Walk in wisdom toward outsiders, making the best use of the time. Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you will know how you ought to answer each person.” The word *answer* implies giving a response to a question.

In Titus 1:9, regarding the establishment and character of leaders in the church, we read, “He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it.” Paul is instructing Titus, his son in the faith, to appoint leaders in the

church who will be able to rebuke, or show the error of, those who teach false doctrine, which is accomplished through reasonable arguments for the Christian faith.

And in 2 Timothy 2:24–25, again regarding the characteristics of church leaders, we read, “The Lord’s servant must not be quarrelsome, but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, correcting his opponent with gentleness.” To “correct” means to give instruction to another either through teaching or by defending a particular truth position.

To this end, the practice of apologetics is dependent on the art of critical thinking. Today many people are apt to adopt a social, theological, or cultural position on a topic without thinking it through or understanding why they believe it to be correct. In addition, modern society and many who call themselves Christians oftentimes are unable to discuss an issue peacefully and rationally, even if the solution is to disagree respectfully with one another.

The goal of Christian apologetics is not to win an argument but to persuade others of the truthfulness of the Christian faith. According to Os Guinness, “Apologetics has lost touch with evangelism and come to be all about ‘arguments,’ and in particular about winning arguments rather than winning hearts and minds and people. Our urgent need today is to reunite evangelism and apologetics.”

When we seek to understand the Christian faith and communicate that understanding to others, we are loving God with our minds (Mark 12:30). And when we love God with our minds, we come to know better why we believe what we believe. As we dig deeper into God’s Word and study to show ourselves approved, we will prepare ourselves to give answers to the questions being asked by the world around us and thereby not only love God with our heart, soul, and strength, but with our minds as well.

## The Believer’s Hope

Peter’s two challenges—to sanctify Christ as Lord in our lives and to be ready to give an answer for our faith—both center on the believer’s hope, “But sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you” (3:15 NASB). But what is



the hope we are called to defend?

In contrast to how some conceive of the term today, the word *hope* (*elpís*) does not refer to “wishful thinking.” The New Testament concept of hope, when directed toward God, entails a sure expectation, or the patient waiting upon something that is divinely granted. Our hope in God is evidenced by what He has done in the past, what He continues to do in our lives now, and what He promises to do in the future. In the context of 1 Peter 3:15, Peter’s use of the word hope can represent the Christian faith as a whole or it can more specifically refer to the hope we are given through salvation—a hope that includes multiple elements.

First, because of Christ we have the hope that our sins have been forgiven. In Psalm 103:12, David tells us that when God forgives His people He casts their sin as far as the east is from the west. In Acts 2:38, Peter, in his sermon at Pentecost, instructed those who witnessed the event to “repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ *for the forgiveness of your sins*” (emphasis added). Later in Ephesians 1:7, Paul reminds believers that in Christ we have redemption through Jesus’ blood, that is, the forgiveness of our sins. It is this forgiveness, which God has shown to us who are in Christ, that we are called to show others. Paul writes in Ephesians 4:32, “Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.” The fact that our sins have been forgiven means that we stand before God spotless and without judgment.

Second, we have been given eternal life. One of the great promises of the Christian faith is the promise of life everlasting for those who have given their lives to Christ. In perhaps the most famous verse in the Bible we read, “For God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16). Twice in His pivotal encounter with Nicodemus, Jesus used the phrase “eternal life” to describe salvation.

Paul continues this same idea in his letter to the Romans when he says, “But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the fruit you get leads to sanctification and its end, *eternal life*. For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is *eternal life* in Christ Jesus our Lord” (6:22–23). What a great hope: the hope of eternal life.

Third, we have the promise of heaven. The eternal life granted

a believer is not an emotionless, never-ending state of consciousness, but life forever with God. In John 14:1–3 Jesus said to His disciples,

Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also.

The place Jesus is preparing for those who love Him is described by Paul in 1 Corinthians 2:9 as that “which eye has not seen and ear has not heard, and which [has] not entered the heart of man, all that God has prepared for those who love Him” (NASB). We cannot even imagine what heaven will be like, how wonderful it will be or how beautiful it will look.

While there are many other promises we have in Christ, the above three summarize some essential elements of what our hope in Christ offers, the hope we are called to defend.

Notice, finally, that when answering the questions of others about our hope, we are to display an attitude of *gentleness and reverence*. All too often Christians are characterized as intolerant of the practices and beliefs of those around them. Sadly, this is sometimes true, but it ought not be. When our faith is challenged as followers of Christ, we are not called to respond with anger, hatred, or resentment, but instead with kindness, respect, and compassion. We would do well to remember the popular saying, “How we say something is just as important as what we say.” As members of the body of Christ, our mission is to be a light to those who do not know Christ, to be living examples of the Spirit of God within us, and to graciously offer answers to those seeking to know God.

Over the next few lessons we will examine some of the most common questions asked about the Christian faith. Questions such as:

- Does God exist?
- Is the Bible reliable?
- Did the resurrection of Jesus really occur?
- Why is there so much hypocrisy in the church?



- Does the nature and design of the universe point to a Creator?
- Why does God allow evil and suffering to occur in the world?

And in our last lesson we will look at some next steps you can take to grow deeper in your understanding of Christian apologetics.