

The Nature and Need of Apologetics

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Welcome to “Exploring Approaches to Apologetics.” Lecture one considers the nature of apologetics and the need for it in view of the crises we face in our times. In addition, we will consider the requirement of doing apologetics in the Scriptures and from a theological standpoint as well as our mission.

George Gallup, the pollster, said, “The central problem today is that people are not solidly grounded in their faith and are, therefore, vulnerable.” Why is apologetics needed? Without a valid basis for faith, Christians are vulnerable. To what? Well, in our schooling we are vulnerable to secular humanist philosophies of education, communist social philosophies, Eastern religions, new age occult techniques, cultic aberrations, and multitudes of doctrinal heresies. A host of alternative worldviews and belief systems are at war with the values of authentic Christianity. The crises of values in the West find many Christians vulnerable without adequate reasons for their faith.

In what other ways are we vulnerable? In the midst of the ethical crisis of our times, Christians are vulnerable morally. Ethics is the branch of philosophy intended to determine what is right and wrong. Today’s Christians may be convinced along with the world that evil is good and good evil, that there are no absolutes, that all is relative. We may begin to live as if we are not accountable and as if there will be no final divine judgment. Christians are also vulnerable in a time of spiritual crisis. It sounds very spiritual to say we cannot know ultimate reality; it is too great for the human mind. It may appear the depth of spirituality when Eastern gurus call reality illusory and the illusory real.

In philosophical terms, the inability to know the ultimate or highest reality occasions a metaphysical crisis. Metaphysics is the branch of philosophy that inquires about the nature of ultimate reality. Is the highest reality with which we have to do atomic energy, human consciousness, the alleged principle of evolution,

or process within nature? Or is the ultimate reality a personal, infinite God, distinct from the world? People who cannot distinguish God from Satan or a dream are in trouble. Unprepared Christians in the midst of those who call God a psychological projection of a father or mother image are indeed spiritually vulnerable.

Christians are also influenced by contact with non-Christians convinced of the inability of the mind to know ultimate truth. This triggers an epistemological crisis. Epistemology is the division of philosophy that studies the sources and tests of truth. Having earlier rejected a Christian belief system, Western non-Christians have now felt the philosophical bankruptcy of naturalistic humanism and are turning to Eastern mythology. The reductive relativism Maya of Eastern mysticism and of Western science supply no criteria by which to distinguish truth from falsehood. Every statement is thought to be relative or some shade of gray. When people now speak religiously they utter mere religious myths or non-informative symbols as a result of the contemporary epistemological crisis. The entire doctrinal framework of many Christians is at risk.

So, at risk from the moral, metaphysical, and epistemological crises of our times are not only individual Christians but our institutions, our families, our churches, and even our nation. Our families are vulnerable when parents have not been prepared to face such issues with their children. The usual church, school, and youth programs do not furnish a solidly grounded faith against different views of God and the world. Before you know it, your son and daughter may be facing conflicting claims concerning ultimate concerns. Your children or grandchildren will be asking why do you believe in a creator who is distinct from the world rather than Carl Sagan's cosmos? Why do you believe that God is good, wise, and omnipotent? Why do you believe the Jesus Christ was God? And why believe the Bible?

The cultural need for apologetics often comes very close to home. Students for the ministry may work for a secular humanist, a Mormon, a Buddhist, or a new age Pantheist. One recently asked me how can I witness to my boss who calls herself a Wiccan (a witch)? Churches may have pastors and other leaders who have been ill equipped to think through these issues with their people. The daughter of the chairperson of your church board who is one of the most generous givers now majors in philosophy at college and her faith is slipping. The beliefs of many people who grew up

in our churches are vulnerable because as parents, youth leaders, and counselors we have not helped them develop adequate reasons for their hope.

As a result of the moral, metaphysical, and epistemological crisis our communities face, the nations are unnecessarily vulnerable. People often lack a sense of significant purpose in life and engage in pointless crimes. Ineffective law enforcement in the community then leads to unbridled lawlessness. Anyone at any stage of life or in any social institution is vulnerable without a solid base for faith. To help lessen our vulnerability to erroneous world and life views, we need apologetics. We need more people like C. S. Lewis, Francis Schaeffer, Josh McDowell, and Charles Colson. One course does not such an apologist make, but it can start a gifted and committed Christian in productive directions. So a goal of this course is to explore various forms of solid ground for faith in order that Christians may be less vulnerable to the crises around us.

What then, you say, is *apologetics*? How is it defined? Most simply, apologetics is the science and art of giving a reasoned case for our hope in God, Christ, and the Bible. We defend our faith against non-Christian faiths not with fire bombs, but answers to genuine questions. The background of the word from which we derive the English term *answer* or *apologetics* is in law not in etiquette. The context is not saying “excuse me for spilling my soft drink all over you”. An apologist, like an attorney, argues a case believed to be true. A Christian apologist is an attorney for a Christian worldview and belief system. The weapons of our warfare are not those of the world but spiritual to the pulling down of strongholds.

Note that apologetics is both a science and an art. As a science it is an organized body of knowledge or a philosophy that defends the objective truth of the faith once for all delivered to the saints. We have seen how important that is in a period of conflicting worldviews. Christian apologetics as an art applies the case for its objective truth to the particular problems a given person may have at a given time in a particular cultural context. As a science, apologetics asks whether the claims we make for Christianity are true. As an art, it asks how we can communicate that objective truth effectively to various kinds of people in the varied contexts of the world community. An effective defender of the faith once for all given to the saints must first know some truth about reality; then they must communicate it meaningfully to a targeted person or audience in a given culture.

This course is concerned with both the science and the art of apologetics but primarily with the coherent philosophical base for holding a Christian theistic world and life view rather than Naturalistic or Pantheistic outlooks. For works primarily emphasizing the art of witnessing to the truth of your faith, see Rebecca Pippert, *Out of the Salt Shaker and Into the World*, (Intervarsity 1979), or read Oxford professor Alister McGrath's *Intellectuals Don't Need God and Other Modern Myths* (Zondervan 1993). And then, just off the press is James Sire's *Chris Chrisman Goes to College* (Intervarsity 1993). Please do not be afraid of the word *philosophy*. It is a combination of two Greek words—*philia* (to love) and *sofia* (wisdom). Putting the two terms together you have *philiasofia*, love of wisdom. A Christian philosopher is a lover of the wisdom that comes from above, from God, and he is one who then seeks to live by it.

Christians love truths regarding God's nature as spirit characterized by holy love, faithfulness, and truth. Christians love the wisdom God revealed in nature and in the Scriptures. Christians love the gracious plan of redemption and stake their lives on it for time and eternity. Christians love ethical truths on which to build a marriage and family and decency in society and their nation. We love truths on which to build a church. We love truths by which to evaluate books, movies, and cultures. We devote ourselves to discovering truths for which we are willing not only to live but even to die.

Is apologetics necessary according to the Scriptures? We've seen the crises of our times call for it, but many Christians seem to think that in spite of all that has been said they do not need to study apologetics. They simply need to quote the Bible. But then they need to know enough about what others hold to quote it relevantly. And they need to know why they are quoting the Bible rather than the Koran. Other Christians imagine that all they need to do in their mission is to give their testimony. But what if their experience is differently interpreted by Naturalists who propose an ordinary, psychological explanation? Or differently interpreted by Pantheists who say it was the inner-self which is divine coming to consciousness?

A missionary must learn something about the culture and develop a relevant approach to defending faith for its members. There is a place for quoting scripture and giving our testimony, but these are not the whole answer to defending the faith. The Scriptures themselves call upon us to ground our faith on the solid rock of

truth and not the sand of error. God requires in Titus 1:9 that ministers hold so firmly to the trustworthy message that they can not only encourage believers with sound doctrine but also refute opponents of the faith. Many pastors do very well these days in encouraging the faithful with sound teaching, but with the emphasis on positive thinking and good feelings, we may not be doing so well in refuting opponents of the faith. Indispensable to adequate refutation of false teaching is a dedicated and logical use of reason.

1 Peter 3:15 and 16 teaches three things about apologetics. First, it begins with a spiritual commitment to Jesus Christ as Lord. Your top priority as you study this course is the lordship of Jesus Christ in your life, and the goal of apologetics is advancing God's kingdom, not yours. It's winning people, not arguments. Secondly, 1 Peter 3:15 requires of every Christian, not just those studying to be a minister, "Always be prepared to give an answer, an apologetic, to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope you have." Hence, you do well to take a course on helping people who struggle with intellectual questions about your hope. How do you proceed? You give an answer, an apology. The defense is not with swords or guns. It is with reasons, solid reasons, logically valid, not fallacious reasons. And the third thing this passage teaches is that the spirit in which we defend the faith is crucial. You give a reason for your hope with gentleness and respect. An apologist attitude must manifest all the fruit of the Holy Spirit. Because 1 Peter 3:15 is so clear and to the point, I am going to assign you the task of memorizing it and be ready always on any exam to quote it verbatim from the version of the Bible you choose to use.

In Isaiah 1 verse 18, the prophet urges a morally corrupt people from head to foot, "Come now, let us reason together." 1 Thessalonians 5:17 (actually 21-22), Paul exhorts church members, "Test everything; hold on to the good. Avoid every kind of evil." We may get the impression that the Bible says only believe, believe, believe everything we hear. Far from it. 1 John 4:1 to 3 says, "Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God." And the spiritual source of any charismatic person is tested not by a pleasing personality and appearance, but sound teaching concerning Jesus Christ. Jude 3, "...contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints." Negatively, we are to refute unworthy objects of faith. Affirmatively, we are exhorted to defend the trustworthy One in whom to believe. I know of no passage in the Bible that says "just quote the Bible". There are these and many others that demand

capability to try, test, examine, prove, and hold fast what is good, to discern right from wrong and give a reasoned defense of your faith.

If apologetics is necessary biblically, how does it fit in theologically? Knowledge, theological knowledge as well, is not mere opinion nor is it even true opinion. Knowledge is well-founded true opinion. The relation of knowledge, then, is important in our theological understanding to faith, to the work of the Holy Spirit, and to evangelism. Apologetics is the defense of the truth about God and the human predicament, and its cure is essential to Christian faith. But is not faith enough as you say? Why do we need reasons when we have faith? Well, truths are guidelines for commitment. Doctrines guide the commitments of faith away from idols and to the God who creates reality and relates to people. Faith saves no one. The One who saves is the One in whom we believe, the object of our faith. Belief ascends to the truth of the gospel concerning the Savior. It is the Savior who liberates us from enslavement to sin. Faith trusts the One of whom the gospel speaks. Believe the gospel. Trust Jesus Christ. But trust is not blind. It needs the guidance of believed truth. Faith and reason, then, interrelate. Faith is not to be confused with gullibility, wishful thinking, or pipe dreams. We put faith in One in whom we have good reason to trust. Faith is not in faith but in another, and it is only as good as its object.

We conclude then that truth concerning the One we trust is indispensable. The faith the Bible recommends is not a blind leap into the dark. It is a reflective commitment directed by truth and supported by adequate evidence. Paul's understanding of faith enabled him to endure against incredible hardships. What was involved in that faith? He said in 2 Timothy 1:12, "I know whom I have believed and am convinced or persuaded that He is able to guard what I have entrusted to Him for that day." Paul's faith involved three essential ingredients: knowledge, persuasion, and commitment.

Just as the Christian doctrine of God involves necessarily Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the Christian doctrine of faith involves knowledge, persuasion of its truth, and commitment to the One of whom it speaks. A blind commitment to authority is not sufficient. We must ask why believe that authority rather than another. Why believe the Bible rather than the book of Mormon? We do not just believe Jesus for we have to ask why believe Jesus rather than Krishna, Gautama the Buddha, or Joseph Smith? We do

not just believe in God, we believe in a personal God who actively responds to those who seek Him, even a tri-personal God, not an impersonal force, energy, or mere power.

Theologically truth is also necessary concerning the work of the Holy Spirit. It is an important instrument of His ministries. Although reasoning to discover truth is necessary to Christian faith, it is not sufficient in itself apart from the ministries of the Spirit in the unbelievers mind and heart. Apologists sow the seed but the Spirit gives it life. Solid reasoning to arrive at true beliefs is an instrument the Holy Spirit uses in saving sinners and illumining Christians. The Holy Spirit regenerates, but the Spirit has chosen not to regenerate alone. The Spirit of truth has chosen to work through witnesses, human instruments who communicate truth and defend it, and He's chosen to work through you.

Any argument against apologetic reasoning is equally valid or, shall we say, invalid against preaching and teaching in the church. It is the Holy Spirit who gives life to the fruit of any type of ministry, but we must plant seeds of truth, water them, and keep them from being overrun with the weeds of untruth. We must cultivate the soil in which the truth may come to life, take root, and grow. We plant and protect the seed of God's truth not only by proclaiming and teaching it but also by engaging in evangelism and pre-evangelism or apologetics. Truth is necessary to faith, it's necessary to the work of the Holy Spirit and also to the mission of evangelism.

A defense of the truths of the gospel is necessary to reach out to that vast, unreached group without the gospel of grace. Our post-modern world is not only post-Christian but also post-theistic. In this age, people may come from radically different world and life views, so they may not know the God of the Old Testament or accept the biblical gospel is true. They may reject the Bible's teaching about the incarnation of the eternal Word in this changing, historical world. Evangelicals know that the unchurched and especially the exploding unreached group of spiritual seekers need to be born again. All spiritual masters are not the same. Because Jesus Christ was unique, Christianity is of greater value than other religions. People in other philosophies and religions need to know that our central claims are true. It is my prayer that this course will help Christians not only to avoid vulnerability but help them reach out to a far greater mission field of people seeking spirituality in the wrong ways.

“Heavenly Father, work in the heart and mind of everyone who takes this course, and may the Holy Spirit use what is taught to grant discernment, and may all that is true and good be useful to You in enabling them to have a greater outreach to advance the kingdom of God. Amen.”

But for some pre-Christians, apologetics may not initially be necessary. Some will accept the teaching of a verse of the Bible as true and from it can see their need of the Savior. And when people do not raise intellectual questions with the nature of God or the deity of Christ, do not postpone their decision with unnecessary apologetic reasoning. Others may need to have reasons for turning to the Bible rather than another sacred writing. But when people are ready to receive Christ, welcome them into the kingdom. Now this course will major on apologetics as a science because courses in missions major on the art of apologetics. They assume Christianity’s truth, adapting the message to the endlessly varied cultures of the world. In an age of rampant relativism, it is crucial that we do apologetics as a science, that we consider the case for objective truth of our claims for all people of all times and all cultures. In the field of missions this will be applied to the host of other contexts.

Apologetics, then, cannot be replaced by assuring of values of all religions with others in endless dialogue. If the Bible is God’s Word, then in presenting the case for Christianity we are not imposing white, Anglo-Saxon standards on anyone. We are reminding all people everywhere of the objective truth of the Creator’s moral laws and marvelous grace. We do not call them sinners, but we deliver the divine indictment. Hence, like Paul, we tell people that God now commands all men everywhere to repent—Acts 17:30. Evangelism is the communication of the gospel, the *kerygma*. Apologetics is the explanation and justification of the Christian world and life view, the *didache* on which the gospel rests. There need be no conflict imagined between the *kerygma* and the *didache* of the New Testament. The gospel and the doctrinal teachings are related to each other as the heart to the body. Apologetics requires criticism of non-Christian world and life views. Evangelism has more to do with the minimum doctrines to be believed; apologetics with a whole Christian worldview and why it merits your belief. *Evangelism* states the core claims of Christianity whereas *apologetics* defends their truth in the context of the existence of God and the possibility of a conceptual revelation. Evangelism assumes the truth of the gospel. The science of apologetics shows why the gospel is objectively true. The case for

the objective validity of the message is for all everywhere; it may be essentially the same.

The conversion of Charles Colson illustrates how apologetics and evangelism go together. The powerful assistant to the president of the most powerful nation in the world became a Watergate criminal sentenced to prison. His dreams came crashing down in the Watergate accusations. A caring friend in congress presented the gospel, but Colson did not know why he should believe. He was then given an apologetic work by C. S. Lewis, *The Case for Christianity*. And through following the reasoning in that book and loving evangelism, he bowed his mind and heart to Jesus Christ and has become an apologist and an evangelist of prisoners. His prison fellowship continues to set sinners free on such considerations as those above.

The social crises we face, the biblical exhortations, the need of truth in faith, and the work of the Spirit, and in our mission, apologetics is a necessity. Interestingly enough, however, even evangelical thinkers who agree with the necessity of apologetic reasoning differ on the best pattern of argument to use. What constitutes solid ground for belief in invisible beings and unverifiable values? In the intangible meanings of verifiable events, how can we support those adequately? Should our reasoning on behalf of our beliefs be from observed particulars to their universal explanations? Or should we start with the general explanations and reason to individual cases in history? Should our reasoning be inductive or deductive? Or should we merely give our testimony? Or are there some other ways we might proceed to establish a solid, reasoned case for our faith?

I welcome you to a course designed to compare and contrast various ways of reasoning Christians follow in answering the most basic questions about their faith. Our generation is not the first to face these issues, so we do well to learn from others who have gone before. We welcome you, then, to an adventure that is called "Exploring Approaches to Apologetics" today. Many apologetics courses are satisfied simply to consider the issue of God's existence, but for evangelical Christians a mere theism is not enough. We are concerned with mere Christianity, with evangelical Christianity, and so, with convictions concerning the Lord of all revealed in the Jesus of history and the teaching of scripture. This course then seeks to serve the kingdom of God by helping people in a pluralistic world think through the most reliable methods of reasoning in defense of evangelical Christian

claims concerning God, Jesus, and the Bible.

Many courses in apologetics take only one form of argument for their faith and develop that in far greater detail. But students are not as likely to know when they take a course like that why they reason in that manner and not in another. We will briefly consider ways of reasoning in the Scriptures and history but will major on comparing the approaches of evangelical philosophers in the last half of the twentieth century. These are men who helped to instigate the resurgence of evangelical Christianity in our times. In doing apologetics we seek to defend our own claims and beliefs on matters of ultimate concern. God is not in the dock or in the courtroom, but our truth claims are on trial. The Bible is able to defend itself. It has survived and flourished through centuries of opposition, but many of us are unable to defend our belief in the authority of but one such book. God can take care of Himself, but can your belief in God's omnipotence? What is the best way to argue for the truth of your belief in the deity of Christ?

In this course, I desire to assist you in developing a way of deciding which of all the conflicting claims people make regarding ultimate reality is true. With a comparison of forms of argument, you will then be prepared to apply the form you find most adequate for testing conflicting truth claims to the members of your church who have genuine questions and to any ideas pre-Christians may raise. Such a defense of the truths or doctrines believed recognizes that a major instrument of the Holy Spirit is truth; truth not only well stated, but also well supported. Authentic worship, furthermore, depends on the validity of such truth. Jesus said we ought to worship in spirit and in truth—John 4:24. Like Paul, we should pray with the Spirit and with the understanding also—1 Corinthians 14:15.

What then is my vision for students of this course? My vision for you is that the outcome in your life is two-fold. First I pray that those who faithfully read and listen will increase their outreach in hard case evangelism and missions. You should be enabled to help some of the millions of western secular humanists who question the existence of God, the validity of God's moral law, the deity of Christ, and the truth of the Bible. The course also helps you prepare to deal with the millions in the Far East—and now the West—who worship and serve Pantheistic gods like Gaia and the earth goddess. The course focuses on how anyone knows what he or she claims to know about what matters ultimately. It seeks to answer the charge that will often come up after your

best attempt: “But that’s just your opinion. Christianity may be fine for you, but it’s not for me.” Secondly, in the limits of this course, we will not answer every question you will ever face in the Eastern or Western worlds, but you should have a method of problem solving, a method of research and decision making that will enable you to work through whatever comes. You should discover reliable criteria of truth helpful in any issue. You will develop a solid theory of knowing epistemology. It will provide a method that will stand in good stead in the midst of conflicting truth claims in philosophy and religion.

One short course, lecture one, then, has considered the nature of apologetics as a reasoned defense of one’s faith. It is urgently needed because of the crises of our times, because the Bible requires it, because theologically it’s indispensable to genuine faith, to the work of the Holy Spirit, and to our mission which demands it. May the Lord guide you in your reading for the next session.